

Alan MacEachern. *The Miramichi Fire: A History*. Xiv + 288 pp. 9 photos, 23 maps, bibl., index. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2020. \$34.95 (paperback). ISBN 9780228001492. Also available in e-book formats. <https://www.mqup.ca/miramichi-fire--the-products-9780228001485.php>

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Volume 44, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098145ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098145ar>

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Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

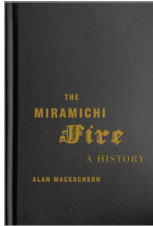
Citer ce compte rendu

Loo, T. (2022). Compte rendu de [Alan MacEachern. *The Miramichi Fire: A History*. Xiv + 288 pp. 9 photos, 23 maps, bibl., index. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2020. \$34.95 (paperback). ISBN 9780228001492. Also available in e-book formats. <https://www.mqup.ca/miramichi-fire--the-products-9780228001485.php>. *Scientia Canadensis*, 44(1), 138–140. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098145ar>

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

The biggest forest fire you never heard of

by Tina Loo, University of British Columbia



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The 1825 Miramichi Fire in northeastern New Brunswick was the largest fire in pre-Confederation Canada, remembered in poetry, music, and novels. But despite its popular cultural resonance, this was a disaster that managed to escape the academic historian's gaze. No longer. Alan MacEachern's new, comprehensive study of the conflagration brings together environmental history and memory studies in generative ways: we learn about the fire's extent and impacts, as well as how and why it was remembered – and forgotten.

The book begins by introducing us to New Brunswick and the Miramichi region. The area is part of Mi'kma'ki, the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq people, and was sparsely settled by Europeans until the Napoleonic Wars and a change in Britain's tariff regime sparked a timber boom. Logs went out and immigrants came in to work in the woods. Nothing in these new arrivals' backgrounds would have helped them understand North America's forests and forest fires. Nor would their experience once in New

Brunswick have helped: in the decade before 1825, there were few forest fires, thanks in no small part to the unusually cold weather. In fact, the second half of the 1810s was the single coldest segment of the Little Ice Age. Low sunspot activity and the eruption of Tambora saw to that. As a result, Miramichiers weren't at all prepared to deal with what would befall them in October 1825.

New Brunswickers experienced the fire locally, making their accounts partial – in all senses of the word. Their stories were limited to particular geographic areas and their understanding of its causes reflected their own biases about immigrants, the Mi'kmaq, and the wasteful ways of logging and loggers. Putting together a thorough account of the fire and mapping its extent, path, and damage required MacEachern to ground-truth these stories using his understanding of the dynamics of forest fires as well as the dynamics of class, race, and the colonial political economy. What emerges from his careful analysis is that the “Miramichi Fire” wasn't a single blaze in a discrete region of New Brunswick, as its name suggests. Instead, it was part of a “fire complex” that burned through much of northeastern North America in the fall of 1825, affecting Maine and Lower Canada.

The graphic accounts of the extent of the devastation led to an international relief campaign—one of the first—that saw donations come from the United States and Great Britain, as well as other British



William Fitzwilliam and W.B. Cheadle, *Voyage de l'Atlantique au Pacifique à Travers Canada*, translated by J. Belinde Launay (Paris, 1866), http://access.bl.uk/item/viewer/ark:/81055/vdc_000000014B74#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-592%2C-156%2C2955%2C3104

North American colonies. Despite the disappointing amounts raised in Britain, MacEachern argues that the campaign was a source of comfort to Miramichiers: “It united them in a common experience while simultaneously connecting them to the wider world” (129).

While it might have united people, trauma didn't lead to transformation. In the aftermath of the fire, some reflected on the society that was damaged and the qualities of the one they wished to rebuild, but MacEachern argues that residents displayed as much complacency as they did resilience. Despite critiques of the kind of society the timber trade had created, and a belief that agriculture was the firmest foundation for the colony, farming didn't take hold in the Miramichi after 1825. Because, as devastating as the fire was, it left patches of forest intact. The timber trade rebounded and, over time, so too did

the forests of northeastern New Brunswick.

The fact that the colony's timber economy recovered rapidly led some to wonder if early accounts of the devastation had been overblown. Such misgivings only deepened over time. The dissonance between what he read of the fire's impacts and the healthy forests he saw all around him led botanist and geographer William Francis Ganong to publish a revisionist account in 1905, arguing that the Miramichi Fire wasn't as destructive as thought. In discussing Ganong's argument, which became authoritative, MacEachern points out why some “lieux de mémoire” like the forests of the Miramichi could so easily be “lost to history – lost by history”: as living, regenerating, sites, “they were easier to forget than to know” (9).

That insight is perhaps one of the most resonant for me, the result of bringing environmental history to bear on the

literature dealing with memory studies. But it's not the only notable aspect of the book.

Even if you don't care about New Brunswick, environmental history, or memory studies, you should read this book for its playfulness and the serious questions it raises. It's rare that academic historians experiment with style, but Alan MacEachern has: *The Miramichi Fire* is written like the nineteenth-century histories he immersed himself in, with headers at the start of each chapter to indicate its contents and authorial interventions.

The latter aren't quite of the "dear reader" type, but he does insert himself into the narrative explicitly, often to make a comment about the research process, and to remind us that his is a work of interpretation. So often historians make themselves and their labour in assembling

a narrative invisible. Not so with this book. If MacEachern wasn't such a good writer this might have come across as contrived. But it's done with a light hand and wry turns-of-phrase, making this book accessible to audiences beyond academic historians.

In addition to thinking about how they write, scholars who are historically inclined will find the larger questions the book raises particularly pertinent. MacEachern's efforts to wrestle with the indeterminacy of the Miramichi Fire—what it was, where it was, what it did, and when it did it—comes up over and over again. This is not something he addresses directly, but I see it as one of the most important contributions of the book. It's an invitation to ask ourselves "what is an 'event'?" and, in so doing, to think critically about one of the fundamental ways we organize the past.