

“Respecting Borders: Two Nations' Histories of a Natural Disaster”

76th Minisymposium of the Centre for Environmental History
6th Rachel Carson Center Lecture

Presentation:

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In September and October 1825, the largest fire complex ever recorded on North America's eastern seaboard swept across the American state of Maine and the British North American colony of New Brunswick. Maine saw an estimated 3400 square kilometres burn, still the most extensive fire in the state's history. The fire in New Brunswick was even larger, burning what early reports estimated to be, and what accounts over the following generation confirmed to be, 15,500 square kilometres, almost one-fifth of the province (or of Austria). The Miramichi Fire, as it came to be known, launched an early international disaster relief effort, was one of the best-known natural disasters in the 19th century, and would be remembered, in fire historian Stephen Pyne's words, as “the first historic holocaust of the reclamation.” Yet the Miramichi Fire has been largely ignored by historians, even local ones; the longest sustained treatment of it in the past 190 years is about ten pages long.

My paper explores how scholarly and public memory of the Miramichi Fire was shaped by the fact that it crossed the American-Canadian border. This was in part because there were two core areas to the fire – in Piscataquis County of central Maine and in the Miramichi region of northeast New Brunswick – and when memory of the fire consolidated in the fashion that typically follows a natural disaster, like water beading on a surface, they consolidated separately. It was also because over time, as histories of forest fires, of the province and the state, and of the two nations came to be written, whether part of the fire happened on one side of the border or another increasingly determined whether that part was discussed. The fire grew smaller and less distinct. Whereas the international border meant nothing to the 1825 fire, it has meant a great deal to how that fire has been remembered.

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Zeit / Time: Monday, 10th October 2016, 18.00 c.t. – 20.00

SAVE THE DATE: 77. ZUG-Minisymposium / 7th Rachel Carson Center Lecture

November 7, 2016: Paul Sutter (University of Colorado at Boulder)

“Pulling the Teeth of the Tropics: Towards an Environmental History of U.S. Public Health Efforts during the Construction of the Panama Canal”