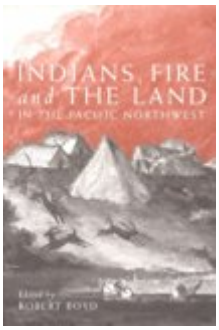
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Boyd, ed.. *Indians, Fire and the Land in the Pacific Northwest.* Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1999. 313 pp. $34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-87071-459-7.

Reviewed by Stephen Pyne

Published on H-AmIndian (February, 2000)

Anyone having even a casual familiarity with the Northwest landscape knows that there are a lot fewer fires today than a century ago. The consensus holds that "Euro-American" settlement is the cause. The naive explanation is that the missing flames are those nature set and the newcomers suppressed. A more sophisticated analysis places the decline with the livestock swarms that cropped off the grasses and forbs that had carried regular fire, and with the roads and farms that chopped up prairies into fire-free chunks. A still richer understanding links the land's missing fires with its missing peoples. When the indigenes departed, they took their innumerable fires with them.

This is a book that explains much of what has vanished. The volume is a compilation of twelve essays by assorted authors, tidily framed with an introduction and conclusion by editor Robert Boyd. Of that suite, ten contributions have been published previously, two written especially for this volume. The book is by far the most comprehensive survey of North American Indian fire practices available. It offers a rich broth of data and disciplines --written sources, sediment cores, fire-scarred trees, interviews and oral histories, ethnographies, old maps, all scrutinized through the lenses of anthropology, forestry, geography, fire ecology, archeology, and environmental history. The book nicely complements Thomas Blackburn and Kat Anderson's compendium on California, ***Before the Wilderness***, and Sylvia Hallam's Australian monograph, ***Fire and Hearth***. The book can well serve as a model for other regions or for any part of the world where aboriginal economies, broadly interpreted, thrive.

So it may seem churlish to target its flaws. But if this study does become an exemplar as it justly may, then we should explore its lapses as well as its largesse.

The first is the decision to bury in the middle of the volume the one essay that conceptually binds the rest. "Yards, Corridors, and Mosaics" by Henry Lewis and Theresa Ferguson proposes that people burned along thoroughfares ("corridors") and over places of habitation and special use ("yards"). The idea is at once simple and universal; the authors demonstrate it for the Northwest,

the boreal forest of Alberta, Tasmania, and even the wet-dry tropics of northern Australia. The same practices express themselves differently because of local conditions. I can think of no place where it does not apply. The essay thus reminds us that demography is, for fire, not destiny, that small numbers of fire-wielding people can exercise wide influence, that people move, that fire propagates. Humanity's fiery reach far exceeds its grasp. As an informing conceit, the model could have helped pare the endless repetitions within the book as we learn how various tribes burned the same species in the same ways. The piles of lists eventually topple over rather than build toward higher insight.

Second, the authors fail to embrace the full spectrum of aboriginal fire practices. Early Whites often denounced Indian burning as wanton and promiscuous. In countering those charges, the authors insist that burning was systematic, utilitarian, and controlled, as much of it was. But not all. Burning also resulted from malice, play, war, accident, escapes, and sheer fire littering. Kindled prairies sometimes flared instead of burning out at night; spring fires that normally expired at wet treelines could continue during times of drought; smoldering logs used to dry out huckleberries might escape delayed rains and catch an east wind to send flame roaring through dense canopies. In effect, ignition became constant on the land. While fire litter might spread only when it coincided with drought and properly aged woods and high winds, its ceaseless presence explains how those lightning- free forests could incinerate from time to time. Again, humanity's fire influence ranged far beyond patches burned for berries or fire drives for grasshoppers. Remove that flame and the structure of even seldom-visited forests would look very different.

Third, the book is content to meld all "Euro-Americans" and "Euro-Canadians" into a single, pyrophobic lump. The cultural distinctions lavished on tribes do not extend to the newcomers. This seriously distorts the history of how Indian burning has been interpeted. Not all "Europeans" were hostile to fire. On the contrary, those on the land exploited it extensively, resisted efforts to restrain their fire usage, and dramatically enlarged fire's domain by mincing whole landscapes into combustibles. Moreover, a strong Western lobby emerged that sought to perpetuate indigenous fire practices, that insisted that forest protection should mimic what they openly called the "Indian way" of "light" burning. Proponents included herders, timber owners, settlers, even the Southern Pacific Railroad.

The critical divide was not between Indians and Europeans but between city and country, between those who resided on the land and those who lived in urban areas distant from it, between those who grew up with their hand on a torch and those who knew fire only in the stove or through books. The more remote the critic, the more vigorous the criticism. The "light burning" controversy pitted professional elites against folk practitioners, of all ethnicities. Revealingly, the chief forester condemned light burning as mere "Paiute forestry." The fight was bitter and lasted for nearly two decades. Had the outcome gone otherwise, as it well might had the Northwest's 1910 conflagrations not so traumatized the Forest Service, the need to "recover" Indian fire practices today would not exist. They would, with adaptations, be the norm. Yet none of this story enters into the text.

Finally, there is a curious but exceedingly common failure of perspective. Eager to show the rationality of Indian fire - to see burning as it appeared to resource-manipulating Indians - the authors fail to pick up the other end of the firestick. They see fire through Indian eyes; they do not see Indians through fire's eyes. The book opens with careful maps of ecoregions and ecoprovinces and tribal homelands. It does not, however, map even the most rudimentary index of fire. It offers no real explanation of fire dynamics: fire simply hap-

pens between people and land. It treats vegetation as "food resouces," not as fuel. It tracks burning within a cycle of seasonal harvesting, not within a seasonal cycle of fuel availability. Yet the latter made possible much of the former. The book places fire within the context of Indian history, not Indians within the panorama of fire history. The authors would bristle at the proposal to write Indian history without interviewing Indians. Yet they have so chosen to write fire history. No one asked the missing fire who abducted it.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-amindian

Citation: Stephen Pyne. Review of Boyd, Robert, ed. *Indians, Fire and the Land in the Pacific Northwest.* H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. February, 2000.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3779