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Cordy Tymstra. *The Chinchaga Firestorm: When the Moon and Sun Turned Blue.* University of Alberta Press, 2015. xxix + 227 pages $34.95, paperback, ISBN 978-1-77212-003-5.

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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

Americans are fascinated by wildfire. Each summer, news outlets broadcast dramatic footage of flames consuming hillsides and homes. Less familiar are the summer fires that annually sweep through Canada's forests. Canadian federal science official Cordy Tymstra's book examines the science, politics, and human stories surrounding one of that country's largest fires, which made headlines in 1950 when its smoke blackened the sky over cities on the East Coast at noonday and caused the sun and moon to turn a mysterious shade of blue.

Much of northern Canada is covered by boreal forests made up of spruces, pines, and larches that thrive in the country's colder climates. Wildfires are a necessary part of this forest type as the cones of many of the pines are serotinous, meaning the cones need fire's heat to melt the resin and allow it to open and release its seeds. While fire is common in this forest type, the fire that blackened nearly five million acres in 1950 ended up changing Canadian wildfire policy.

Tymstra understands that the history of this type of natural event is shaped by human culture; judging fire as good or bad and the resulting response from the human community is purely based on our cultural understanding of fire. The author attempts to put a human face on the events by focusing on the lone government employee charged with fighting this fire. Canadian Forest Service district ranger Frank LaFoy was based in Keg River in northern Alberta on June 1, 1950, when a fire was reported near his district. Given responsibility to protect the homesteads and settlements in the area from fire, LaFoy did his best to alert the remote clusters of farms and camps in the fire's path. His Sisyphean efforts to suppress the fire were hamstrung by his superiors because Canadian fire policy at the time dictated he take no action to fight the fire if it was more than sixteen kilometers from a settlement (p. 9). That gave the fire a lot of time and space to roam in the sparsely populated northern Alberta frontier. The unnamed, or "ghost," fire (wildfires in Canada are not given names until a suppression

effort is mounted) made several major runs up the Chinchaga River Valley over the next few months before it finally burned itself out on October 31. By that time the Chinchaga Fire had burned somewhere from 3.5 to 4.9 million acres and two inversion layers sandwiched its smoke, sending it as far as northern Europe and Scandinavia. The widely reported blue coloration of the sun and moon, Tymstra deduces, occurred due to the unique combination of smoke particle size and density (p. 161).

The Chinchaga Fire is archetypal in many ways but the author astutely observes that neither the size of the fire nor the severity of the 1950 fire season was "as important as who smelled the smoke" (p. 15). The public alarm and outcry over the smoke, especially from the United States, spurred the Canadian Forest Service to adopt a total suppression model similar to the one in effect in the US since 1935. The later chapters of the book document some of the effects this policy had on Canadian forests.

The policy changes the Canadian Forest Service adopted following the Chinchaga Fire are analogous to the American experience, although they materialized forty years later. As human settlement and industry pushed into the forests of the western United States, a massive fire event in 1910 spawned similar calls for suppression policy changes. The result of excluding wildfires from fire-adapted ecosystems is an unhealthy overload of trees throughout North America. The author's call for fire policy changes on the Canadian side of the border echoes similar conversations taking place on the American side as well.

The Chinchaga Firestorm is a great introductory book on the arc of Canadian fire history and the government's efforts at control. The author does an excellent job addressing the different cultural perceptions and practices of wildfire among First Peoples and Euro-Canadian settlers and how the politics of a wildfire are just as important, if not more so, than the fire's actual size and effect on the land. I recommend it for those interested in a wider perspective of wildfire and government's response across international borders.

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