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Mark Tebeau. *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800-1950.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. xi + 424 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-6791-0.

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In 1800 America's cities burned often and occasionally hugely. The urban landscape remained largely wooden, which is to say, a reconstituted forest, which meant it burned with the frequency and intensity of the forests from which it came. Fire protection was primitive. Building codes were absent or ignored. Firefighting was a rowdy, often chaotic affair, whose best hope was to quarantine an embryonic wildfire to as small a plot as possible and contain economic losses. A stiff wind, though, could fan flame into conflagration. Insurance was possible, but the riotous character of fires and a laissez-faire social context in which every structure lay at the mercy of its neighbor meant that assurance companies came and went with the gusty flames. Fires threatened urban life even more than rural. Unless cities could impose some order over combustion, life would be too dangerous, business too risky, and society too unsettled to sustain urban culture.

By 1950 all that had changed. Conflagrations no longer swept America's metropoli; insurance companies had quantified and mapped risk, and along with urban reformers worked to prevent fires through enforced codes and public education; and firefighters had evolved into a model of manly if middle-class bureaucracy. So thorough was this reformation that firemen had redefined themselves from primarily fire fighters into life savers. In 1800 the image of a fireman was that of a man with a bucket or a hose. Well before the mid-twentieth century this figure had morphed into the iconic image of a man with a victim in his arms. How this astonishing transformation in urban fire occurred is the subject of ***Eating Smoke***, a detailed and affectionate study by Mark Tebeau, a professor at Cleveland State University and, as he notes repeatedly, the son of a firefighter.

To span those two eras Tebeau devises a narrative dialectic between firefighters and fire underwriters. Paired chapters advance the internal story of each group, while playing against the other. The pairings, in turn, fall into four eras, each titled with a metaphor--smoke, fire, water, paper--that suggests "the connection between fire protection and the process of urbanization," the linkages among "broader social changes in the nature of community, societal organization, and the econo-

my" (p. 7). The structure promises to contrast the heroic against the bureaucratic, the personal with the institutional, the public display of firefighting culture with the muted but ultimately more powerful reformation wrought by actuarial tables, Sanford maps, and obscure manual-writers no doubt wearing green eye-shades.

Quickly, however, the author subverts his own structure. Each group had its own evolution, full of quirks and internal contradictions. The oft-received wisdom that volunteer firefighters were rowdy, generally ineffective, and even hostile to genuine reform, including innovative machinery, he refutes. There were continuities, survivals, and the persistence of a subculture as volunteers morphed into permanent departments. In particular, firefighters prided themselves on technical skills, which easily accommodated shifts from horse-drawn pumps to steam engines. As they adapted to new technologies, and to new built environments, firefighters moved boldly from the periphery--squirting water along the moving front--to the interior, plunging into the walled scene of the flames, "eating smoke." In the process, like a snake sloughing off old skin, the fireman shed the image of fire fighter for that of life saver. Protecting property--the formative rationale for fire brigades--mattered less than rescuing people from urban hazards. This metamorphosis continues today.

Perhaps more fascinating was the metempsychosis of the underwriter from Jacksonian man to Progressive, from agents devoted to the calculation of financial self-interest into public spirited reformers dedicated to reducing waste and promoting a safe environment. The early companies were businesses: they survived by taking in more from premiums than they paid out in claims. What mattered was not whether fires came, but whether the agents had made the right estimates on risk. Contrary to received wisdom, insurance companies were not committed to the elimination of fire. That came much later, in part because the risk of conflagrations made everyone vulnerable: the flames took the just and unjust, the insured and the uninsured, the careful and prudent along with the reckless and slovenly. So long as fires could burn across miles of cityscape, all companies were vulnerable. Even so, it was the politics and values of Progressivism, the search for the rational, the expert, and the efficient, that seemed to push for a collective solution. The National Board of Fire Underwriters, the National Fire Protective Association, the Underwriters Laboratory--while their impact came over several decades, it was ultimately decisive.

Eventually, the two narratives merged into a common cause to restructure the very landscape of urban fire. In the process, both firefighters and underwriters found themselves transformed into something closer to middle-class norms. They began to resemble civil servants, bureaucrats, and corporate businessmen, pleased to still stand for a public heroism or a public-spiritedness, but looking at retirement packages and thinking about diversifying their portfolios. They became more alike, although the fireman's turnout coat never fully transmuted into a grey flannel suit. The world they had helped make now remade them.

This is a dense book, full of intriguing facts, observations, and interpretive concepts. It is also a text cluttered with a continual gloss of commentary, constantly stating (and restating) every event in the oft-stilted language of academic history, as that profession chooses to define the world. At times the reader may feel like a firefighter in a smoky building, unable to move because of all the debris on the floor, with yet another conceptual wall threatening to tumble down. Over and again, the text slows while the author explains how this-or-that fits some theory of ethnicity or gender or model of urbanization, the intellectual equivalent of doing hose and ladder drills. Little of this is necessary. Mark Tebeau demonstrates repeatedly how both firefighters and underwriters were perfectly capable of comprehending their circum-

stances and expressing their understanding. He shows they were capable of speaking for themselves. He should have let them do so.

All in all, the book has much to interest a constellation of audiences. While the topic most firmly sits within fire history, this is a subject without a discipline. Instead, the text should find readers amid urban history, social history, gender studies, and of course among those in the fire services interested in moving their chronicle beyond anecdote and the repetition of a clichéd narrative. All will find here plenty of substance, and some may even welcome the relentless glossing, for this is a text of informed scholarship. It is, not least, a book any father might be proud of.