

## Making History from Fighting Fire

The invitation to deliver the Furniss lectures described the last – the one before us – as a kind of intellectual autobiography. Let me try my hand at it, without too much emphasis on either the intellectual or the biographic. The truth is, I'm one of the most boring people I know. To paraphrase Groucho Marx, if I didn't have to know me, I wouldn't want to. Still, I've never met a colleague who says his or her experience is typical. Like the residents of Lake Wobegon, we're all above average. We all have unique stories about how we came to be where we are.

Here's mine.

I write history today because I read history as a boy. I'm a professor because, when I was 11 I became stricken with strep infections that settled in my kidneys and heart and left me an invalid through my middle-school years; I went from being a good student to an obsessive one. And I became a scholar on fire because, a few days after graduating from high school, I took a job as a laborer at Grand Canyon National Park. When I showed up, an opening appeared on the North Rim fire crew, and I was asked if I wanted to become a smokechaser. I knew nothing of the North Rim, and less about fire. I said, Sure, with the confidence that only a callow adolescent can muster. I returned to the North Rim Longshots for 15 summers. Everything I've written about in the past 40 years – even the fact that I write books at all – dates from that decision.

Ten years after I joined the Longshots I had graduated with a BA from Stanford and an MA and PhD from the University of Texas (Austin). I'd been rejected by all the grad schools I had applied to – I don't know why; something was amiss with the application, I suppose. I got into UT by a fluke, and started in January, 1972 out of sync with that year's cohort. Then, for four years after receiving my doctorate in 1976 I was rejected for academic posts. Meanwhile, the emphasis on affirmative action meant there were no permanent jobs available in the federal fire agencies. My one great continuity was fire on the Rim. It should surprise no one that I would become a historian of fire.

As a young adult (or by another perspective, a suspended adolescent), I lived two lives, one on a university campus and one on the North Rim. They had nothing in common: they were mutually impermeable. Every year I lived twice. But in late, 1976, with my student days completed, I decided that I needed to find some way to make those two parallel life-lines meet. I was working that winter on the South Rim, at Desert View, and I determined I would apply the scholarship I had learned to the subject that most gripped my imagination.

I convinced the U.S. Forest Service that it ought to help sponsor a research program that would survey our national experience with fire. They agreed, but only if I worked without salary or benefits, and again, as I had a decade before, I accepted without really understanding what I was doing. If you want to know why *Fire in America* looks and sounds the way it does, you have to appreciate that fact – how thoroughly I did not understand what I was doing and how completely isolated I was from any adult supervision. I only knew I wanted to do it.

What scholarship might I bring to the task? I had an eclectic education at Stanford. I finally selected English as a major of convenience. From that experience, I learned that

texts could be analyzed, even nonfiction texts; that nonfiction has its own willing suspension of disbelief as it creates imagined worlds; that themes can be more than theses; and that English, immersed in New Criticism and headed for postmodernism, was intellectually moribund. From the American Studies program at UT, I learned that ideas mattered; that all aspects of a culture share in that culture such that even outlier topics like exploration can be analyzed for what they might say about their sustaining society; that a life of scholarship could be a life worth living; and that American Studies as a field was also moribund.

At UT no one mentored me. I designed my own program, avoided being a problem, and went off and wrote my dissertation, a biography of the American geologist G.K. Gilbert, pretty much by myself. Then I submitted it to my committee. I got two comments. My supervisor, William Goetzmann, thought the title pretentious, which it was, but I was allowed to leave it, and he told me to replace subchapter numbers with headings, which I did. I left the program thinking of myself as a historian of science and of the American West. In retrospect I believe that both fields were really proxies by which to study nature through history - this at a time before environmental history had staked out its claims. But what did I know?

Good history - any writing; any insight, really - begins with a felt need. What I felt most was fire, and how it informed my life on the Rim, which is to say, my life overall. On the Rim we discussed fire endlessly: there was almost nothing else that mattered. We described our fires' quirks while hunched over ration coffee on late-night firelines, we compared our fires' ease and misery when we returned to the fire cache, we sang and cursed our fires at the saloon. They all, each one, had a personality. There were charmed fires and ugly fires, glorious fires and fires that were existentially wretched, fires rich with loose dirt and mean fires that burned amid nothing but roots and rocks. There were fires that hurt, fires that hummed, fires that inspired, fires that infuriated. Our lives spun on an axis of fire. If the fires came, we feasted. If they faltered, we fasted.

So when it came time to write a fire history, I simply projected those experiences more generally. The North Rim became America, and eventually the Earth. The informing role that fire assumed for the Longshots expanded into its presence for *Homo sapiens*. The power of fire to catalyze the ecology of ponderosa pine and aspen enlarged into a power to catalyze history. My resolve - more determination than insight - was to put fire at the center. Fire would organize American geography. Fire would date America's historical periods. Fire would inform and animate the American experience. From a tradition that examined only people as agents, which I thought unduly circular, I would construct an ellipse, for which people could claim one focus and fire the other. I would write histories about the Earth as a uniquely fire planet, and humanity as a uniquely fire creature.

In my first effort, *Fire in America*, I got fire centrally placed in the text, but I did not succeed in having it drive the narrative; in truth, there *was* no narrative in a meaningful sense. So far as I knew, after publishing my Gilbert biography, my fire book would be my one and only contribution to scholarship. I put a lot into it that I would not have included if I had thought I could continue. And its survey of topics are those that might hang in a fire cache, not those that might sit on stacks in the academy. Fire became a

universal presence, but it was not yet an informing principle. I remained a smokechaser at heart, hotspotting from one topic to another.

All this I would refine over the coming years, and here and there others have picked up their firepacks and joined the quest. What may be less easy to share is the quality of evoking fire's presence. Fire as an agent. Fire as a forcer of action. Fire as a protagonist around which the narrative pivots. This is not an anthropomorphized fire: fire remains a physical reaction. But it *is* an animated fire, and in speaking of it I tend to infuse into fire the same sensibilities I acquired on the Rim. This was something I learned; I doubt it is something that can be taught.

The resulting voice may be the trait that allows my fire books to survive even as new evidence challenges the particulars of their narratives and analyses. After all, sources can multiply over time, and craft can improve with age; but what renders text into art is an ineffable alchemy that must come from our felt relationship to the subject. For me it came from being a Longshot.

The intellectual history that evolved subsequently is simple enough. From my *Gilbert* biography I taught myself how to write a book, and how to edit on my own. From *Fire in America* I learned how to make a natural phenomenon into a meaningful cultural history, and how to allow fire to serve within a text as a unifying presence. But it took *The Ice: A Journey to Antarctica* to understand how to make an inanimate feature of nature into an organizing conceit for literature. I learned how to evoke a world organized around a natural phenomenon, and so demonstrate that phenomenon's presence and power. Such a text could show, not merely tell; it could gather topics, arguments, observations, and information like iron filings around a magnet, not simply list them as examples or roster them as evidence.

*The Ice* is an imagined world, though one not made fictionally; and it is a world in which everything refers back to the most simplified of phenomena, a single mineral. With *The Ice* it all came together: literature, nature, history, and if I may be permitted, something of a personal style. There may also be something in the subject itself. While fire can dazzle with its flames, it must be fed constantly. The reflecting ice simply is. If any of my books survive me, this is the one.

By now - 1986 - I had a more or less permanent academic appointment at Arizona State's new West campus. My formative period was over. Maturing came as I continued to write. I became convinced that we know things not in themselves but in relation to other things, and the thicker that context the deeper our understanding. So I opted for context - for comparison, for contrast, for continuity, all of which evolved into what I have come to call the Cycle of Fire suite. To *Fire in America* I've added big-screen fire histories for Australia, Canada, and Europe (including Russia), a world survey, collections of essays, and an update on the original, and am headed to Mexico so long as the peso falls faster than the dollar and I can master enough conversational Spanish to do more than order the occasional taco and Coca Cola. Meanwhile, to *Gilbert* and *The Ice* I've added studies of the Grand Canyon and the Voyager mission.

How might I assess that oeuvre? It's mixed. It was all possible because of my extraordinary isolation. I've written in fields that, for the most part, are not taught, or taught as history. The books are not centered historiographically, and they are not written for the classroom. I had little instruction in grad school except by general

example, mostly by reading. When I wrote my formative books, I had no one to tell me I couldn't do what I was doing as I chose to do it. When I finally landed a stable academic post, I was one of seven faculty for all of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; I had no colleagues. I had no one to chide me, nudge me, inspire me, or prod me to answer the historiographic issues that inflamed the discipline. I was free, as Emerson put it, to seek an original relationship with the universe.

While this might make the output unique, it can also place it in intellectual quarantine. This is not scholarship as a social undertaking. If you want to counter my "thesis," you have to find it first, and then create an alternative world of equal imaginative power. The more I continue in my Cycle of Fire suite, the harder the cost of entry becomes for someone else. The intellectual ideal – certainly the careerist ideal – is to announce a concept or insight in an essay or a short book and let others do the prospecting, digging, and smelting. Instead I continue to spot the smokes, chase them down, fell the flaming snags, and mop up the ground fire by myself. I don't have students, research assistants, or colleagues. I do it all, from binding the photocopies to sweeping the fallen chads off the floor. As a result, the Cycle of Fire may become *sui generis*, a universe of its own. I worry that, as my biology colleagues might put it, the organism is flourishing but not reproducing.

How did it all happen? I can point to the pieces and identify where they came from. I can't explain the alchemy that allowed them to come together as they did. The one undeniable catalyst is the North Rim – that much is clear. Nor can I urge others to follow my example. There have been too many perilous moments for my family; too often I have found myself hanging by my fingernails on another financial ledge; I couldn't keep selling the family cow for a handful of magical beans. My biggest break, a MacArthur fellowship, fell like a Coke bottle out of the sky, and sent me scurrying to the edges of the world in an attempt to make sense of it. All in all it's an experience I can't in good conscience urge upon anyone else, and a life I wouldn't trade for any other.

That noted American philosopher Uncle Remus once noted that you can hide the fire, but not the smoke. When I began, fire was hidden from academic history. But a young smokechaser could sense, if not see, those smokes, and did what experience and temperament had trained him to do. He chased after them. He made history out of fighting fire.

I'm chasing them still.

Delivered at Colorado State University, 25 March 2009  
Copyright 2009 Stephen J. Pyne