

factions and shifts, in which wider, general patterns might be discerned. Without them, we behold a tableau of great breadth and detail, but uncertain historicity.

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## POLITICS OF FIRE

*Burning Table Mountain: An Environmental History of Fire on the Cape Peninsula.*

By Simon Pooley.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. xi + 315. \$90.00, hardback (ISBN 9781137415431).

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**Key Words:** South Africa, southern Africa, environment, imperialism, historical ecology, science.

Many scholars have waited with anticipation for the release of Simon Pooley's monograph, *Burning Table Mountain*, which is based on his PhD and postdoctoral research at Oxford University. They will not be disappointed. Pooley has produced a seminal environmental history for South Africa and for environmental history more generally. It is a book that speaks to historians as well as scientists, residents of the Western Cape, and scholars throughout the world. The book is a model for rigorous archival history that advances historical and scientific knowledge.

Pooley's book is refreshing in its regional geographic scale given the propensity of historians to take on global histories. His coverage is focused on the Table Mountain and the Cape Peninsula, arguably the ecological and spiritual center of the Cape Floristic Region. The Cape Floristic Region is considered to be one of the world's biodiversity 'hot spots' in terms of speciation, endemism, and diversity: the region houses around 9,000 species, the majority of which are endemic, in a relatively isolated area covering the southwestern region of South Africa. The region is prone to periodic fires, which ecologists now recognize as an integral part of the lifecycle of many plants and the various ecosystems housed within the mountains and valleys of the Cape Fold Mountains. These fires have shaped how humans interact with the region and, in turn, humans have modified these fires by changing landscapes, pursuing anti-fire policies, and undertaking efforts to plant exotic trees and, now, to protect indigenous vegetation.

Table Mountain has been a contested site since the settlement of the Dutch in 1652 until the present day. Pooley traces how the settlement founded by the Dutch East India Company led to the dispossession and ecological transformation of the regions nearby Table Mountain, including the established cities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch. VOC official attitudes towards fire encouraged fire suppression, a view that remained a dominant government position for centuries. Pooley's study of attitudes towards fire in the 1600s and 1700s indicates that anti-fire attitudes were not necessarily born out of a forestry tradition, although these early views merged with the beliefs of many foresters when they began to arrive in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The introduction of modern scientific forestry in the 1880s in the Cape Colony ushered in a new era in terms of management and ecological change. Foresters argued that tree

planting would increase water and moderate climate. By the 1930s and 1940s, it became apparent that these exotic trees were becoming invasive, they possibly used more water than native vegetation, and they encouraged more intense fires. A series of sectoral conflicts and events – notably the 1935 Empire Forestry Conference – prompted government officials and researchers to establish long-term research stations at Jonkershoek, outside of Stellenbosch. During the second half of the twentieth century researchers working for the forestry department and other research institutions used significant effort to understand the ecological dynamics of fire and trace the effects of exotic tree planting on hydrological regimes, in order to determine how and where to plant exotic trees. This research was implemented into an effective fire and invasive species management framework that was put in place from the late 1960s to the late 1980s before the decline of the apartheid government.

Pooley's study goes on to consider the socioeconomic drivers of fire while also investigating contemporary politics of fires in Cape Peninsula. His work uncovers continuities and changes from the period of white rule to the current multiracial democracy. His book provides excellent analysis, but he is cautious about offering any single conclusion about how to live with fire. He rightly emphasizes that fire has been part of the Cape for millions of years, and humans and fires have and will continue to interact together. We may need to look back on aspects of older policies – something Frederick Kruger and I have also argued – in order to improve existing conservation policies regarding fire, forestry, and invasive species in South Africa.

Readers leave the book wanting to know more about the history of fire in South Africa. Is the Cape example representative of wider trends in southern Africa, a fire prone region of the world? Pooley offers some tentative thoughts, but he also leaves the field open to further investigation. Pooley's work offers the new starting point for scholars studying fire, forestry, and invasive species in South Africa. It will become a standard reference for scientists working on fire in Mediterranean climates. Environmental historians will also point to it as a model study integrating science and environmental history.

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## RICE ACROSS CONTINENTS

*Rice: Global Networks and New Histories.*

Edited by Francesca Bray, Peter A. Coclanis, Edda L. Fields-Black, and Dagmar Schäfer.

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**Key Words:** Rice, Africa, agriculture, environment, globalization.

The old continental and disciplinary demarcations of area studies have faded so much that an Africanist history journal can ask a Latin Americanist geographer to review a book about the emergence of global networks related to a crop mainly associated with Asia. The volume certainly counts as a multidisciplinary effort, the product of a 2011 workshop