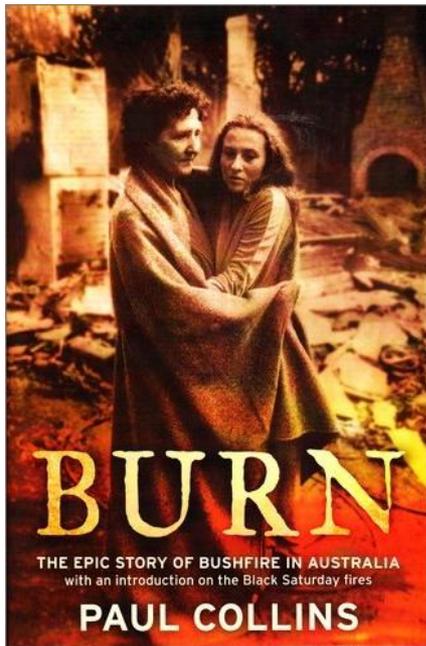


Burn: The epic story of bushfire in Australia by Paul Collins. Carlton North: Scribe, 2009, pp. xxviii + 420, AUD \$42.95 Paperback, ISBN: 9781921640186.



Fire is a tool. Fire is a weapon. Fire is a servant. Fire is an enemy. But above all fire is dramatic, especially fire in Australian bushland. It can reinforce itself, generating fierce winds by convection updrafts, which in the Canberra fires of 2003 produced a '14 kilometre high cumuliform plume ... above the fire'. (287) It can progress at enormous speed, with advance outposts ignited by 'spotting' by embers carried before the fire-front; even sails of ships at sea have been ignited by embers.

Collins's first 325 pages are reportage that build up a picture of the experience of fire, in a skilful use of journalistic techniques of specification, with real stories of real, named, individuals being recounted, a personalisation reinforced by the small number of photographs, all but one of which are of victims or destroyed property. The accounts are relentless. Major fire events are reported, with repeated features emphasised. We have stories of complacency: of fires deliberately lit to clear agricultural

land, to stimulate new growth for grazing stock, for 'fuel reduction', for boiling the billy, and, yes, arson. Despite new technologies becoming available, efforts to stop the fires are essentially similar over the two centuries covered, as are the human stories of heroism, lucky escapes, and tragedy – ranging from being boiled alive in a water tank that did not turn out to be the safe refuge anticipated, to whole families being asphyxiated. Collins relates recriminations, blame and scapegoating, and repetitive official enquiries that cover similar ground after each episode.

Major fire follows major fire, for most of European settlement. The massive fire(s) of 2003 stand out as different, in that there is little evidence of human ignition. Around 2.58 million hectares (274) of the south eastern Australian highlands, just a little less than the size of Belgium, were burnt out, to which must be added the extent of the fire that encroached into the suburbs of Canberra, which was 'really the northern edge' of the Victorian and New South Wales fires. These appear to have been initiated by a large number of lightning strikes in dry thunderstorms during a spell of extremely hot weather accompanied by high velocity dry winds at a time when the bush was dry, and the humidity of the leaf litter and soil was low. The weather patterns are a common feature of the series of major fires analysed, including the Black Thursday (1851), Red Tuesday (1898), Black Friday (1939), Ash Wednesday (1981) the alpine (2003), and the most recent Black Saturday (2009) fires, the last of which receives a brief treatment in the introduction to this new edition.

Weather is an element that cannot be controlled, and so other factors have always been sought as a means of 'prevention'. The accounts of the enquiries into the fires bring out the conflicts between those who advocated, and advocate, regular deliberate large-scale fires to clear out the fuel load and those who argued, and argue, for minimal intervention. These conflicting positions are dealt with in most detail in the account of the different stances taken by foresters and the managers of Melbourne water catchments before the Royal Commission into the 1939 Victorian fires, but recur in the evidence to the enquiries into the more recent widespread conflagrations.

The final section, 'The great fire debates' considers the positions taken on the issues related to 'Fireproofing Australia'. Once again, there is skilled reportage, and some useful commentary. After reading so much of those who have characterised fire as an enemy and the reporting of deaths in bushfire tragedies, it is a useful corrective to be told that the number of deaths since 1788 is 'considerably less than 2000'. (366)

In his discussion of the arguments in favour of using an Indigenous approach to fire, Collins makes it clear that whatever Australian Aboriginal practices may have been, these are not a useful guide to modern desirable practice. Not only were the climatic and ecological contexts of pre-European human fire practices so varied that a single 'answer' applicable to all of Australia would be most unlikely to be achieved, but in any case the context of a hunter-gatherer society with a population so much less than that of the current industrial, urbanised nation could not be an infallible guide even within smaller regions, including in Aboriginal lands. As he points out, even in the northern tropical savannahs 'there is a difference between what a traditional tribal Aborigine on foot could do in terms of fire lighting, and what a modern one can do dropping fire-lighters from a four wheel drive'. (344)

In perhaps his most useful discussion in this section he points to a conflict of values that is implicit or explicit in debates on how to minimise fire risks. The differing positions of those responsible for water supply and those charged with supporting exploitation of forest resources before the Royal Commission into the 1939 fires are seen in this light, as are values of individual freedom that permit residential development in the urban-bushland fringes around the major cities and holiday homes along the otherwise rural coasts. Collins's own position is that 'care for the environment' 'must take first priority' (367) over human rights.

Despite some interesting views, the last section is a disappointing part of the book. The suggestions for action are often facile, even accepting the supremacy of nature's rights. There are too many internal contradictions, for example 'managing' the forests is described as a rhetorical device reflecting 'the manipulative milieu in which we live' (368), but his suggestions about planning for dwellings on the urban-rural fringe, and for electronic GPS tagging of those suspected, but not charged or convicted, of arson (359), are also management of interactions between humans and the bush, but management toward ends that he favours.

Nor is there a serious, critical, assessment of the scientific evidence on Australian forest ecology. It appears that he assumes a static, idealised forest, and that departures from the steady state caused by the natural fires are temporary aberrations, with the forests naturally returning to the pre-fire state. While he is correct to emphasise that Australian flora and fauna are fire adapted, with populations able to survive even fierce fires, Collins does not recognise that many of the forest-scapes in which he revels are also the result of fire adaptations. In particular, a lifetime's work by the late David Ashton on the Mountain Ash forests has shown that these forests will not reproduce themselves without relatively large scale periodic – but infrequent – fires that stimulate seed drop into an ash bed which the seedlings need to mature successfully. Without fires, Ash forests cannot replace themselves and would be succeeded by wet temperate rainforest species. Ashton's work is notable in that the 'fire maintained sub-climax' nature of these forest communities only became clear after extended studies; his initial short-term PhD experiments (1956) failed to show that ash seedlings that germinated in open spaces caused by fallen trees did not survive to maturity. His 2001 DSc was not his last word on the ecology of this species: papers on the autecology of the species under his name continued to appear up to 2010, five years after his death. The role of fire in Australian forest ecology requires very long term studies to understand it; unfortunately Collins has not reviewed this literature as well as he has presented the drama of the inevitable fiery interactions between Australians and their environment.

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