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Book Reviews



Greg Bankoff, Uwe Lübken, and Jordan Sand (eds)

Flammable Cities. Urban Conflagration and the Making of the Modern World.

Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012, vii + 409 pp. ISBN
978-0-299-28384-1. Price: USD 29.95 (paperback).

Western Europeans rarely confront ‘urban conflagration’. The red fire-alarm call-boxes that used to adorn city streets disappeared long ago, and even the hydrants have been moved underground, though occasional sirens do wail through urban streets. Nevertheless, or perhaps therefore, large-scale urban fires fascinate historians. Yet recent historical studies on urban conflagration are rare. This collection is a courageous attempt to cover as many burning cities and countries as possible—18 in all—in one publication, mainly set in the nineteenth century, but a few essays cover earlier or later years. Some of them deal with such a recent period that in those cases one can hardly say that the ‘modern world’ was still being ‘made’, and personally I would have preferred to draw the line at the eve of the Second World War. There are four essays dealing with East and Southeast Asia: Edo [Tokyo] (1600–1868), by Jordan Sand and Steven Wills; Manila (nineteenth century), by Greg Bankoff; Singapore (1960s), by Nancy H. Kwak; and Jakarta (1966–present), by Jérôme Tadié. Two address the Middle East: Istanbul (1865–1870), by Cornel Zwierlein; and Beirut (1975–6), by Sofia Toufic Shwayri. Four look at Europe (Amsterdam, Lisbon, Hamburg, and an essay on Russia in general). Another four take on North America (Montreal, a general essay on the nineteenth-century USA, separate chapters on San Francisco and Cleveland). Three explore Latin America (Valparaíso, Buenos Aires, plus an essay on Mexico in general). Africa is only represented by one city, Lagos.

The essays are presented in more or less chronological order, but also grouped into three broad thematic sections. Part I is called *Cities as Fire Regimes*. Early modern cities developed, according to the Introduction, a system of building and managing cities that developed in relation to specific pat-

terns of fire, engendered by environmental and social conditions. Part II is entitled *Fire as Risk and as a Catalyst of Change*, and Part III is called *The Politics of Fire*, dealing with the post-World War II period, mainly addressing questions of the political meanings of urban conflagrations in squatter-built cities.

In the introduction it is argued that natural fires are usually restricted to arid zones, such as parts of the USA (California), the Brazilian savannah, southern Africa, and Australia. However, urban fires are rarely 'natural', and they are in most cases the result of human action, either inadvertent, or deliberate (arson), and they are, therefore, to be found in all climate zones, even the very wet ones. Fire cannot be understood only as a physical event, embedded as it is in the social system; class is an important factor influencing neighborhoods and populations at risk. In Asian cities, vulnerability was linked to the fact that in response to the constant threat of fire, houses were built cheaply (and furnished sparsely). After a fire, therefore, houses could be rebuilt quickly and cheaply, thus creating path dependence. Fire was used by the colonial authorities in defense against the plague, torching a district of Hong Kong in 1894. Large fires were a welcome opportunity to redesign a city. In Southeast Asia they can be regarded as part of 'slum clearance' projects, legitimizing massive resettlement.

The book's introduction is followed by an essay by Susan Donahue Kuretsky, on Jan van der Heyden and the new firefighting equipment he invented and introduced in Amsterdam in 1673. It was soon widely sold outside the Netherlands. Lisbon imported the fire engines as early as 1683 (p. 156). William of Orange brought these engines to England when he became King in 1689, and Peter the Great ordered them for Russia after he visited the Amsterdam factory in 1698 during his tour of Holland (p. 28). The engines reached Japan in 1754 (p. 56).

Cities outside Europe fared differently. In Japan's capital, for instance, "[a]lthough small fires, both accidental and intentional, were a daily occurrence, fires that destroyed multiple buildings in Edo were a seasonal phenomenon" (p. 44). Another interesting point is that large conflagrations were useful to the shogunate's style of rule. It dealt with them as a way to reaffirm its hegemony: executing suspected arsonists, re-parcelling the land and resettling the people, but also demonstrating "shogunal largesse" (pp. 47–8). The chapter on Istanbul argues against the use of a simple category of "Asiatic cities", pointing out that while Istanbul in the nineteenth century was a high risk, flammable city, the Indian colonial cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras had minimal losses, because of the damp monsoon months and the houses built of non-flammable material simply did not burn (p. 97). According to the essay on colonial Manila, it 'was two cities: a city of stone and wood largely inhabited

by Spaniards, and a city of nipa palm and bamboo where the indigenous peoples mainly lived' (p. 170). In the inner city, where the Spaniards lived, the role of fire had been limited by building in stone, but this led to greater vulnerability to earthquakes. The indigenous city, however, built of light materials, burned easily and was easily rebuilt. Owing to rapid urbanization of Manila in the late nineteenth century, the European core expanded by encroaching into the indigenous periphery, 'threatening both with renewed destruction' (p. 183). The essay about a large fire in Singapore in 1961, tells the story of how the disaster of an urban conflagration was turned into a 'blessing' of slum clearance and rehousing of the slum-dwellers in 'modern' high-rise buildings, according to the ruling party (p. 309). Beirut was a city at war with itself in 1975–6, while the Central District was burning repeatedly, and the essay in this book details the interplay of war and fire, a classic combination (p. 135). The chapter on Jakarta since the mid-1960s can be read as a companion piece to the essay on Singapore. 'Occurring in different types of neighborhoods, fires reveal the different concerns of people in the city, from poverty and survival-related issues, to modern international developments linked with globalization' (p. 381). It is a missed opportunity that there is no essay on early-modern Batavia, as Jakarta was called prior to 1949, given that there is so much documentation on fires in that city prior to 1800, and because Batavia had Dutch fire engines (mobile water pumps) at least as early as 1739, which would have been a nice prelude to the arrival of such a machine in Japan.

The book concludes with an afterword by fire-historian Stephen J. Pyne. It is to be hoped that this interesting collection will be read by many people, perhaps even by those who are not historians.

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