

By September 2000 over six million acres of forests in the U.S. have fallen to wildfire. This was not a surprise to many natural resource professionals who recognized the condition of western forests that only needed only a summer drought and ignition to produce the worst fire season in recent memory. But the media and the general public, and certainly those who have lost their homes, ask why they didn't understand the risk. In March of 2000, the Forest History Society in cooperation with the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and the Library of Congress brought Dr. Stephen Pyne to Washington D.C. to introduce showings of the FHS film "Up in Flames" and the Hollywood classic "Red Skies of Montana." This short article is adapted from his introductory remarks.

GREEN SKIES OF MONTANA

BY STEPHEN J. PYNE

In *Young Men and Fire* Norman Maclean alludes to "the literature of forest fire, if such a literature exists." It is remarkable that almost no such literature exists, and that when a book finally broke into literary consciousness, as Maclean's did, it came from someone outside the fire community. Tens of thousands of firefighters pass alongside the flames every year, and have for most of the last century, yet almost nothing of literary merit has resulted. (But then that was also true for the Civil War.) Fire films are no better; and a film to rival Maclean's masterpiece is nowhere on the horizon. Why are the pickings so poor?

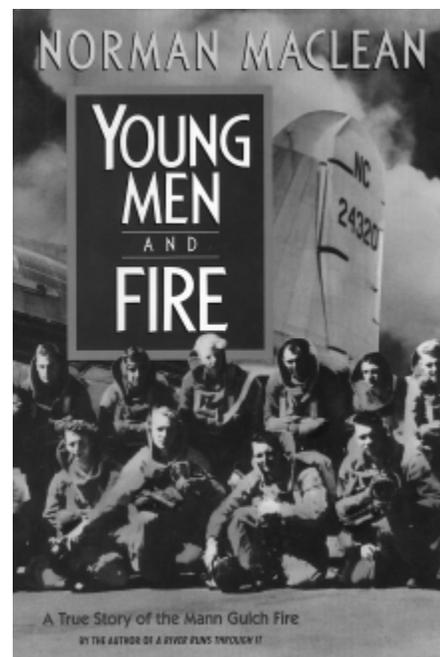
One reason, perhaps the most fundamental, is the difference between action and drama. Fire control abounds in physical action, yet it remains strangely inert regarding moral drama. Wildland firefighting appears as one of America's great contact sports; smokejumping belongs with stock-car racing as a kind of public entertainment; the books that spark from time to time read like juvenile sports stories. The fire community tends to do, not to write. It thinks with its hands, not with ideas. The possibilities are rich for a literature of action and adventure; and in particular, it is easy to tweak the firefight into the genre of the war story. Revealingly, the *Great Fires of August 1910*, arguably the beginning of modern American fire history, coincided

with the publication of William James' famous essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War," in which America's premier philosopher argued to redirect martial energies away from war and hurl them instead against the hostile forces of nature.

For films there is a second difficulty, which involves directing fire on the set. (In comparison with wild fire, even actors like Marlon Brando seem positively domesticated.) Free-burning fire obeys its own script. Probably computer animation can overcome this difficulty. But that still leaves unresolved the question of a moral void. Where is the conflict? Where the choice? Where the moral core? One common solution is to have a human agent start the fire, which then serves as a proxy for human malevolence. But what if, as in wildland fire, nature ignites the originating blaze? What justifies throwing people out of airplanes to fight lightning-kindled blazes in places so remote that they are beyond normal human life? The fires threaten people only because some people, firefighters, attack them. Is this Ahab's pursuit of a white whale, or a simple excuse for adrenalin? Too often the fire exists as a challenge, not a choice. A smoke report sounds a call to arms and a search for the courage to face the flames—to attack the fire; any fire, any place, any time. Most routine

war narratives demand no more: the value of the fight is both implicit and unequivocal. Great war literature goes further: it explores not only the will to act, but the question of what act to will when the choices are ambiguous or plain awful. Maclean shuffles around this difficulty by presenting the Mann Gulch crew as innocent to the fact that they owed the universe a tragedy.

All this aptly characterizes what is probably our best fire film, *Red Skies of Montana*, a 1952 release, likely inspired by



George Stewart's 1948 novel *Fire* and the 1949 Mann Gulch fire which killed 13 firefighters, but a film whose understood subtext is the Korean War. Aside from its clunky special effects (trees don't really explode like howitzer shells), *Red Skies* probably does as much as one can with the genre, and it holds true to type by shifting the source of the moral action, the conflict, within. The story opens and ends boldly—actually with the same events—but creaks through a flabby middle as the physical action slows, unable to find an internal drama as strenuous as fireline duty, and we must watch Cliff Mason struggle to overcome his amnesia and self-doubts—not the best material for a motion picture, which after all thrives on movement. What redeems the movie are some surprisingly strong acting; several striking sets, notably the burn on Bugle Peak and the parachute loft where chutes hang limply like ghosts of the dead; a sometimes haunting musical score; and the simple momentum of a firefight.

Not much changed until 1992 when Norman Maclean turned the young smokejumpers who died at Mann Gulch into existential heroes, engaged in an unequal fight with the transcendent “It” at the core of human existence. The oxygen-sucking Blowup became a physical metaphor for the unknowable meaning at the core of the universe. The moral story thus turned inward. It's not obvi-

ous, however, how one might film such a meditation. If someone does, the outcome will likely resemble *Red Skies* but with better graphics and a two-income family.

Yet an alternative story does exist, and it derives from reexamining our relationship to fire and indeed to nature. When *Red Skies* was released, America was engaged in a cold war on fire; all flame could be imagined as enemy fire, as hostile fire. The only administrative

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requirement was to attack those flames as quickly as possible—to apply a doctrine of “force enough, fast enough.” But that perception no longer holds, not ecologically, not ethically. What we do or don't do with nature is no longer considered neutral: nature is not simply a backdrop or a handy crank to turn the plot. Ecologically, removing fire from a landscape can be as powerful an act as applying it. Morally, what we do with fire has consequences far greater than the individual choice to jump or not jump. Attacking fires in the backcountry may

be a mistake—is now widely regarded as a regrettable error of national judgment. If the firefight is a moral equivalent of war, it equates with Vietnam rather than World War II. Smokejumpers have thus become valiant workers in a deeply flawed cause. Large swaths of the Western landscape are the worst for their labors. Much of that land suffers from a fire famine and may explode catastrophically from the steady stockpiling of woody fuels. The great imperative that haunts the public lands is to somehow put fire back into the scene.

All this offers the prospect for a drama more nuanced than the simple and hackneyed firefight-as-battlefield. Today, wildland fire is awash with choices, all mired in complexity, none of them answerable by a simple clarion call to suit up and jump. No one has yet found a way to tell this narrative in literature or film. When, in the climax to *Red Skies*, Cliff Mason holds his crew in their foxholes by fist and force of personality, he is replaying the central scene of American fire history, that ineffable moment when Ranger Ed Pulaski held his crew at gunpoint in a mineshaft while the firestorms of the Big Blowup of 1910 raged about them. That event is a magnificent piece of Americana; but the fabled incident is far too restricted by itself to encompass our relationship to fire. The tragedy is not that we fought wild fires but that we ceased to light controlled ones. We need both. We need to choose when and where and how to apply and withhold fire. Such qualms never create the brows of the dispatchers and fire officers and smokejumpers of *Red Skies*. But they should.

Yet if the fire-as-battlefield is a tired trope, there is no rival metaphor of equal stature to challenge it. We need one. We need at least one other, a complementary story of equivalent literary and moral power, and until controlled burning acquires such a narrative, fire management will never rally the public to the degree necessary to put its preaching into practice. Prescribed fire doesn't need a policy. It needs a poet. It needs someone who can turn Montana's red skies green.

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U.S. FOREST SERVICE PHOTO

Fighting wildfire has been considered the moral equivalent of war.