

# History As Therapy

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AT THE HEIGHT of summer fire danger, on Friday, 13 February 2004, the ABC launched on its website an online documentary about the most awesome bushfires since the European occupation of Australia. The Black Friday fires of 1939 still represent the 'worst possible' conditions in a continent of fire. The website reveals just how deeply Black Friday burned into the national conscience, and how profoundly it changed attitudes to society and nature. It also took lives and left survivors with enduring emotional and physical scars. Some of those stories are told for the first time.

The Black Friday bushfires — the culmination of a weeklong inferno and the climax of a long summer of anxiety — shocked Australian society to its core. Rampant flame humbled and terrified a people who felt they had brought civilisation to the bush. It was a moment in the environmental history of Australia when settlers had to confront — and reform — their relationship with nature.

Moira Fahy, the producer, director and writer of the documentary, assisted by project manager Lisa Redlich, offers a gutsy portrait of Black Friday and its legacy. Judge Leonard Stretton's Royal Commission into the 1939 fires, which is featured on the website, was admired for its fearlessness. There is a kind of fearlessness in this documentary, too. Its special quality, heightened by a multimedia presentation, is to release the emotional history of the event. The project serves our hunger for firsthand testimony of the fires of our nightmares.

The fire came upon the Robinson family at Barongarook with the suddenness of an earthquake. Terrified, four of their children made a frantic dash for the track they used every day to go to school. When their father later found them, they were lying in pairs in the same order that they walked to their lessons. 'To talk was torture,' wrote survivor Mary Robinson of the grief over the loss of her children. Sixty-five years later, talking is still torture to many of these survivors and witnesses. For the first time, the lifelong trauma is truly revealed. It is a measure of the great dignity of these people that they are willing to share such an isolating experience.

The research that has created this documentary is all the more humbling to me as someone who has spent ten years thinking about this fire and its historical legacy. I have written about Black Friday, and it has been my privilege to contribute to this project with historical research and advice. But I did not imagine that some of these stories remained to be told. Perhaps I did not have the courage or vision to seek them out. But here they are, rescued at the edge of memory, and they make a deeply moving document.

There is another sense in which this documentary is timely. In the summer of 2002–03, fires engulfed large swathes of the Australian Alps and even roared into the heart of the national capital. Comparisons with Black Friday abounded. Even at the beginning of that recent summer, the parallels were uncanny. A dry winter followed a long drought; the summer began early and ominously; the bush was tinder dry. The shadow of overseas war lengthened.

In the late spring of 2002, Moira Fahy, Lisa Redlich and I travelled into the heart of the Victorian forests that burned on Black Friday 1939. We talked and listened to people preparing for another horror summer. They were keenly aware of the parallels. When they walked in the forests, they could hear the sinister crackle of history underfoot. As Judge Stretton would have put it, people 'who had lived their lives in the bush went their ways in the shadow of dread expectancy'. We sought their advice for this project, and they turned gratefully to history as a source of wisdom — and also as a kind of therapy. In talking about 1939, they rehearsed their fears for 2003.

Those striking historical parallels between the fires of 1939 and 2002–03 infuse this documentary. Bruce Esplin, Head of the Victorian Bushfire Inquiry of 2003, reveals here an acute sense of history. He can feel Judge Stretton looking over his shoulder. He shares the judge's sense of responsibility and privilege, and admires his tenacious search for truth. And like Stretton in 1939, Esplin in 2003 found that the inquiry put him 'in touch with a part of myself that had been lost, my love for the country and Victoria'.

Esplin recalls that Stretton was a poet (he was known as Victoria's judicial bard) and movingly describes wood sculpture as his own method of catharsis. 'I have taken some wood that has been badly burned in the fire and then carved into it to find the fresh, living, highly-polished wood. There's the burned shell and then, as a sign of regeneration and regrowth, the fresh, highly-polished, beautiful-looking timber.' Esplin — like Stretton, and like Fahy — was, by the nature of his work, 'taking on board some pretty strong emotions and a pretty palpable anger ... I think we underestimate the cost of grief to our societies ... A lot of people would have made the argument that time heals all — obviously it doesn't.'

As well as exploring raw layers of the history of grief, the parallels between 1939 and 2002–03 extend to issues of political debate. The Black Friday fires and the ensuing Royal Commission demanded a new official respect for systematic fuel-reduction burning as a form of fire management. This constituted a judicial, urban and bureaucratic recognition of

aspects of local, folk fire practices. ‘So the school of experience met the school of forestry in the field, if you like,’ explains historian Peter Evans, whose meticulous research supported this project. That struggle to find the right balance between local knowledge and statewide management, between popular and learned ways of seeing nature, and between what is selfish and what is safe, remains at the heart of debates in the aftermath of massive fire, then as now. On this website, you can interrogate the past on these enduring issues by journeying into the 1939 Royal Commission transcripts. Key extracts from the 2500 pages of testimony are presented here. That commission created one of the most important archives in Australian environmental history, and it has never before been made easily available to the public.

Towering over all these stories are the biographies of the trees themselves. Many of the mountain forests we know and admire today were seeded in the Black Friday fire. Indeed, the sheer scale of the 1939 fires forced scientists and managers to look seriously at just how these trees regenerated. After almost one hundred years of European settlement, and after half a century of intensive utilisation of the tallest hardwood in the world, settlers finally started to investigate the life cycle of the tree itself, its ecology. The regrowth forests are now more than sixty-five years old and are approaching, perhaps, a sawmiller’s version of maturity. Yet since 1939 we have undergone a revolution in the way we value our forests. ‘As I understand it,’ muses fire manager Mike Leonard, ‘trees didn’t vote back then.’ The keys to the ecology and future management of the mountain ash forests are to be found in an understanding of Black Friday and its consequences.

Fire inflames blame. In the aftermath of fire, people do not always have the patience for complex solutions. This documentary therefore makes a crucial contribution to public debate by taking the long-term view and by aiming to understand rather than to blame. It resists the media-driven search for a scapegoat, and exposes us instead to vivid and subtle stories and reflections. It also plunges us into practical philosophy. There is a perennial question in human affairs that is given real edge and urgency by fire: do we learn from history? That vital question haunts all the narratives of 1939, and especially those that explore the parallels between the summers of 1939 and 2002–03. A Victorian fire manager reflects here on ‘the cyclic nature of fire and the short-term memory of communities’.

The superb expert testimony recorded on this website suggests that there is one thing we never seem to learn from history: that nature can overwhelm culture; that some of the fires that roar out of the Australian bush are unstoppable. ‘There are times,’ Mike Leonard reminds us, ‘when you have to step out of the way and acknowledge that nature has got the steering wheel at the moment.’ It seems to go against the grain of our humanity to admit that fact, no matter how severe are the lessons of history. There appears to be an embedded human inability to acknowledge the true force of fire. This online documentary grimly continues our education.



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