

# Taking Fire: The Historical and Contemporary Politics of Indigenous Burning in Australia and the Western United States

Wednesday 22 May 2019 4:15–5:30pm

School of History Seminar Series  
Speaker: Daniel May, Australian National University

McDonald Room, Menzies Library, ANU



Aboriginal Australians and Native Americans used (and continue to use) fire in deliberate, systematic ways to achieve a variety of cultural, economic, and environmental goals. These practices have received increased academic and public interest in recent years, yet little attention has been paid to the manner in which these practices have been understood, contested, and appropriated. This thesis examines the historical and contemporary politics of Indigenous burning in Australia and the United States. By examining public and academic discourse I argue

Indigenous burning has been understood by non-Indigenous peoples as academic curiosity, political incendiary, and increasingly – lived reality. I explore how understandings of Aboriginal Australian burning have shaped, and been shaped by, understandings of Native American burning.

In this seminar I examine debates over prescribed burning in the aftermaths of large bushfires, the extended politics of integrating cultural burning and biodiversity conservation in national parks, and conceptual battles over wilderness. These understandings have inspired policy and, I argue, helped legitimate it – with profound consequences for cultural politics and ecological communities.



**Daniel May** is a PhD Candidate in the School of History, ANU, and an Associate Student in the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre. His PhD thesis investigates the historical and contemporary politics of Indigenous burning in Australia and the United States. In 2018, Daniel completed an Endeavour Research Fellowship at the Forest History Society (Durham) and California State University (Chico). He has won awards from the Australian Academy of Science and the Australasian Association for the History, Philosophy, and Social Studies of Science. Daniel has presented his work to the public, historians, and fire managers in Australia and abroad.

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