

PESHTIGO 1871: PETER PERNIN'S PESHTIGO FIRE MEMOIR. THE FINGER OF GOD IS THERE!

Translated and edited by Charles E. Mercier
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Next to the Great Chicago Fire, Peshtigo's may be America's best known fire disaster. Which isn't surprising: they occurred on the same day, 8 October 1871, and arose out of the same environmental circumstances. Chicago's calamity led to a stock market crash and modern architecture. Peshtigo's announced a 50-year cycle of conflagrations around the Great Lakes for which the 1871 holocaust furnished a paradigm.

Among the aftershocks was a personal account left by a survivor, Jean-Pierre (Peter) Pernin, a Roman Catholic missionary priest from France, who published an 18 000-word pamphlet three years later. A fire is just combustion unless it connects with a larger culture. Pernin's *The Finger of God Is There! A Moving Episode of a Strange Event Told By An Eyewitness* helped personalise what was a regional outbreak of wildfire and made the village of Peshtigo its enduring symbol.

Pernin wrote his account in his native French, and it was simultaneously published in an English translation by John Lovell, and later reissued with annotations by the Wisconsin Historical Society on the occasion of the fire's centennial as *The Great Peshtigo Fire: An Eyewitness Account*, and again reprinted in 1999. Pernin's parish church at Peshtigo was rebuilt, eventually to become the Peshtigo Fire Museum in 1963.

So why a new edition?

It's the 150th anniversary of the fire. The translator and editor, Charles Mercier, a professor of classics at a Roman Catholic humanities seminary, is a descendent of one of the two nieces Pernin brought with him from France. Mostly, Mercier wants to correct what he regards as errors of translation, especially passages Lovell and his successors deleted and the larger omission of Peter Pernin himself. It was, after all, a priestly mission that had brought Pernin to Peshtigo. The problem of translation is not only to recode formal French into colloquial English, but to centre the account from the fire to the life of a missionary priest, one of whose experiences was to survive a firestorm.

Accordingly, Mercier presents both the original French and his own translation of it into English, along with extensive notes, commentaries, and background briefings on ecclesiastical personalities and quarrels. We get a biography of Jean-Pierre, complete with an analysis of his education (which shaped his writing style) and his theological training (which influenced how he viewed the world). He had a life before the fire, and he had one afterwards, although it was profoundly branded by his experiences on 8 October 1871. The fire damaged his health and destroyed his parish buildings, which forced him to spend years rebuilding both. He wrote his account to raise funds for that project.

What did Peter Pernin see? And think he saw?

For an epigraph he chose Psalm 65: 'We passed through fire and through water. But you brought us out from there to give us rest.' His ordeal had been a double baptism. He survived the general conflagration by spending five and a half hours in the Peshtigo River. Whatever was exposed to the air would burn. What was submerged would chill. He experienced both.

So, too, he had to rely on both reason and revelation. He is careful to use reason to describe the material events and rely on revelation for deeper meaning. Why did Peshtigo burn more savagely than other communities? The giant logging mill that dominated the scene, a village made of its products, and a countryside trashed by the axes it encouraged explains a lot. Intriguingly, Pernin speaks of a 'horrible tornado [*tourbillon*]', amid a 'ceaseless twisting of opposing winds'. Was *tourbillon* just a literary or theological allusion akin to God speaking to Job out of a whirlwind? Or was Peshtigo visited by a literal fire tornado?

His fundamental fascination, however, lies less with the fire's behaviour than with humanity's. Some people harkened to the numerous warnings; most did not. When the fire struck, 'everyone ran inevitably to their destiny'. Pernin survived, but with 'a complete prostration of body and mind'. The social equivalent to the *tourmillon* and its opposing winds was a bridge across the Peshtigo River. 'Everyone thought that there was safety on the opposite side of the river. Those who lived on the east side drove themselves to the west side and those who lived on the west side drove themselves to the east side. This ensured that the bridge was blocked by crowds of cattle, vehicles, women, children, and men who were pushing each other out of the way to find an escape.' Meanwhile the bridge caught fire.

'Who can fathom the designs of God?'

How, and why, had Peter Pernin come to live and not others? 'It is still something I wonder about today.' Survival, Pernin concluded, was 'only a matter of chance', and no one 'could boast of having had more presence of mind than anyone else'. Why, likewise, was Peshtigo wiped off the map while other villages, 'no less offending', escaped? Perhaps it was 'the modern Sodom meant to serve as an example to all'. He could only say that the finger of God was present and that even 'our weak reason itself tells us' that God must remind us from time to time of our obligations by means of 'great cataclysms'.

Pernin's new church arose in nearby Marinette, where a vision of the Virgin Mary had putatively appeared in 1859 to a Belgian-immigrant farmgirl, Adèle Bryce, and became the site for subsequent pilgrimages. Without endorsing the Mariaphany or invoking miracles, Pernin notes that the flames

spared the community Bryce had established. He dedicated his resurrected parish to Our Lady of Lourdes.

It is a journey few fire scientists today would make, but a secular pilgrimage to Peshtigo may persist. Over and over, the vision of the great fire begs for revisiting and reinterpreting. Here it would seem an omnipotent nature, aroused to fury by humanity's misdeeds, had been obligated to unleash its terrible

wrath as a reminder. The Anthropocene also has its Sodoms. The Peshtigo paradigm can still beckon.

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