

Book review

A change in the weather: climate and culture in Australia, Tim Sherratt, Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin (Editors), National Museum of Australia Press, 2005. ISBN 1-876944-28-5, \$49.95

If you read this book, and I urge that you do, you will in all probability be surprised, frustrated, fascinated and wishing to learn more. Surprised that a book on this subject matter has not been compiled before, given Australia's high dependence on climate; frustrated by a lack of connection drawn between many chapters of the book; fascinated by the many ways that climate and culture intersect (and the book spans only a part of that intersection); and, by book's end, left with a number of unanswered questions driving a wish to learn more about climate and culture in Australia.

The book is a highly multidisciplinary volume, ranging from climate and history through climate and people – although ironically, each chapter is by a single author representing their own discipline. To quote from the book's chapter on climate change and human health, 'There is a need for a more integrated type of knowledge...there is a special need for interdisciplinary, indeed, transdisciplinary, approaches – that is, approaches that harness the ideas and energies of assorted disciplines within a *synergistic team*.' (my emphasis).

The book contains a fascinating and diverse set of essays, some of which extend beyond the topic of climate and culture or climate and history in Australia. In summary form, and following the structure assembled by the editors (who advise that the structure is meant to be suggestive of shifting perspectives), the topics are:

Elements and outlooks

- 'Human elements' is an introductory chapter that ranges widely over the topics covered in the book and makes some linkages between the chapters – its theme is climate impacts and human responses.
- 'History of climate outlooks' provides insight into the development of ideas about whether Australia's climate has a degree of predictability on the seasonal time-scale.

Change of seasons

- 'Indigenous concepts' explores Aboriginal understanding of seasons, change and patterns in the tropical north of Australia.

- 'Migrants and nomads' explores how previously unknown patterns of bird behaviour, linked to Australia's variable climate, were slowly discovered (and in the process, this section draws other conclusions about climate impacts).

The possibility of rain

- 'Goyder's line (the line of reliable rainfall)' is an instructive essay on the struggle to understand and accept it.
- 'Rainmaking' is a useful history lesson on science attempting a very complex problem (cloud seeding) – this informative piece goes beyond the issues of climate and touches on human nature.

Maximums and minimums

- 'Managing climate for the Murray Darling Basin' covers adapting European agriculture and pastoralism to the variable climate and environment, including issues of salinity and degradation. Dealing with complexity, cooperation and competition is writ large in this study of the Murray Darling Basin Commission. Read it and ponder.
- 'The curse of the tropics' describes the European Australian struggle to overcome climatic 'prejudices' – the progress of ideas about the hot humid tropics and hot dry interior in parallel with the technology that made inhabiting them easier.

Sunny periods

- 'Mothers, babies and mortality in colonial Melbourne' is a telling story extracted from colonial records (both mortality and meteorological) recorded with care and now so valuable.
- 'Solar energy and sustainability' is a review of our attitudes to sunshine and solar energy, presenting the solar energy facts, and discussing the social drivers facilitating or inhibiting uptake of solar energy for sustainability.

The long-range outlook

- 'Revolutionary weather' is a global sweep of likely impacts of the major 1788–1795 El Niño, which also impinged heavily on the first European settlement of Botany Bay.
- 'Climate change and human health' is an overview essay that is global in content and forward-looking in its focus. Again, it is a broad sweep beyond Australia.

Winds rising

- 'The roaring 40s' documents the role in the histo-

ry of Europeans in Australia of that pervasive, extensive, globe-circling band of strong westerly winds occurring at the latitudes of the 40s.

- ‘Cyclone *Tracy*’ has a strong cultural and documentary focus on the people involved and how we as a nation handled the disaster of *Tracy*.

Change expected

- ‘Palaeoclimates’ describes a strong debate about the impact of evolving climates on Australian societies, particularly past societies.
- ‘Social psychology of climate change’ is a strong, challenging, and sometimes provocative essay on our efforts and difficulties in dealing with the climate change issue.

A glance over the contents listed above will immediately show many of us that this book is important, since some subject matters have been somewhat neglected in the past. However, what is missing is as important as what is there – for example, there are no essays on climate-shaped landscapes and national production, nor on the impact of climate on our economics, on our arts and literature, on the way our cities have developed and operate, or on our social systems. There is obviously much more to research and publish in this broad field.

In the palaeoclimates chapter, we are told that there has been a strong and ongoing debate among Australian archaeologists on whether (and how much)

climate influences human communities. Yet in another chapter, we are also told that indigenous communities knew their climate – environment system intimately and learned to live by it. And on historical time-scales, there are data to show that climate variability influences GDP, ruins lives, makes fortunes and creates lifestyle opportunities. To a climate scientist, therefore, the debate is not if, but how much and how. Perhaps this shows how overdue is this multi-disciplinary volume and how much interdisciplinary work there is to do.

Returning to the quote about the need for interdisciplinary approaches: historians will no doubt quibble about some of the viewpoints from the scientists presented in the book. This climatologist quibbles about some of the generalisations and literary license from the historians. Maybe that calls for another conference and another volume – providing opportunity for those with specialist knowledge to contribute synergistically to understanding more about climate and culture, climate and history. In the meantime, all of us should read this beautifully presented and fascinating book.

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