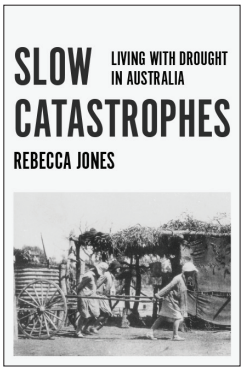
Drought diaries

Drought as a cultural concept

Deb Anderson

SLOW CATASTROPHES:
LIVING WITH DROUGHT IN AUSTRALIA
by Rebecca Jones
Monash University Publishing, $34.95 pb, 357 pp, 9781925495430



How do people cope with drought, not as an abstraction or singular event but as a lifelong trial? In a bid to answer this question, historian Rebecca Jones elevates an understated, if underrated, historical source for understanding human responses to drought: the humble farm diary. Publishers' enthusiasm for diaries as authentic historical documents and works of fiction seems as strong as the scholarship about diaries is vast. Yet amid the groundswell of interest in recent decades among humanities scholars in addressing ecological issues and crises, Jones's attention to this particular genre of diary writing is unique. Through diaries, by default, *Slow Catastrophes* relates the passage of time and the dynamics of lived experience. The longer-term view it offers is critical to understanding the real paradoxes of Australian rural landholding, much like those of drought.

Strikingly, for a country where the effects of landscape have been invoked repeatedly as explanations of character, there was little published on drought as a cultural concept in Australia as recently as the millennium drought. Environmental historians noted in the anthology *A Change in the Weather: Climate and culture in Australia* (2005) that, in Australian historiography, climate has often been imagined as the 'backdrop' against which history played out or culture defined itself. Jones's major study of Australian experiences of drought is a necessary extension of the field, delving deep into the cultural and historical dimensions of environmental concern.

Today, as Jones points out, Australian farms and the 157,000 people who run them are 'increasingly characterised as anachronistic' in an urbanised nation. Her approach to their history, culture, and futures is anything but. The author set the tone – a blend of compassion and dispassion – with her first book, a history of organic farming and gardening in Australia, *Green Harvest* (2010), which underscored the dependence of human health on the non-human environment. Similarly, a humanist ethic and willingness to genuinely engage with rural people and land, to grapple with human and non-human nature, frames this account of the challenge of farming sustainably in drought-prone

Rain-making equipment, Charleville, 1947. The 'Stiger-Vortex-Gun' was conceived by Clement Wragge, a Queensland meteorologist. Ten guns were built in Brisbane and then placed around Charleville. On 2 September 1902, gunpowder was emptied into the breech of each gun and then detonated. No rain fell. (John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland via Wikimedia Commons)

and highly variable climates.

At its heart, *Slow Catastrophes* tells the stories of eight farming and grazing families based in south-east Australia from 1870 to the 1950s, the driest period in the meteorological history of the south-east. It does so principally through seven farm diaries – some of them records for the entire household as well as the individual – which is itself a humbling feat, if underrated for the patience it demands of the historian. The shortest diary Jones accessed spans sixteen years; the longest, half a century. Day by day, month by month, year by year, she pieced together what she describes as a 'deluge of the everyday': ledgers of weather, cropping, finance, and stock, of daily activity, achievement, and events near and far, as well as of reflections and feelings. There are other methods of researching the dynamics of experience, if more mediated by memory; longitudinal oral history, for instance, can by design embrace the critical narrative act of retelling. But the farm diary is inimitable for its capacity to reveal what happened before, after, and between droughts, which, Jones shows, is as important as drought itself.

Indeed, what she makes of these diaries is as fascinating and evocative as the book's title. Stories of family, property, and community – hope, loss, and renewal – are presented, inside and outside of drought. The focus on private lives and inner thoughts follows in the footsteps of the likes of Katie Holmes's *Spaces in Her Day: Australian women's diaries of the 1920s and 1930s* (1995), Andrew Hassam's *Sailing to Australia: Shipboard diaries by nineteenth-century British emigrants* (1995), and Bill Gam-

mage's *The Broken Years: Australian soldiers in the Great War* (1975). So too Jones values the roles the handwritten artefact served for its author as a practical tool: both a record of existence and a statement of transition – of learning. In this case, we gain intimate insights into farming as a work in progress, thus a rare glimpse of how lived experience builds up over time, in the formation of symbolic and cultural capital. Where health and social scientists and agricultural economists have valued rural diaries as a tool of measurement – to home in, for example, on the gendered division of farm labour – in contrast, here we are encouraged to recognise the wide sweep of social, environmental, and temporal circumstances in which humans respond to drought.

The first section of the book convincingly relates the rhythms and patterns of 'living with drought' – of people enduring but also seeking to adapt. Anchored in those stories, the second section teases out the complexity of intellectual, practical, physical, and emotional responses to drought that emerge, including discussions with contemporary farmers and pastoralists, too. Intriguingly, here Jones explores two competing, parallel understandings of Australian climates over the past 150 years: of drought as an aberration (of 'normal' climate as predictable) and of drought as recurrent reality. In this respect, *Slow Catastrophes* fosters its own story of hope, by considering the ways that drought has formed a catalyst for individual and collective social and environmental renewal. Strategies that farmers and graziers have used historically to endure periods of low production and adapt to drought include wild harvesting, self-sufficiency, mobility, and off-farm work. That said, the implications for the debt-laden farmers of contemporary industrial agriculture, whose systems are structured around continuous production and require predictability, raise the spectre of loss of local knowledge and culture. 'Adaptations,' Jones states, 'which helped so many farmers … in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, may no longer be economic options today.'

A real strength of this book (and its capacity to inspire) is revealed in the final chapters, which make a carefully reasoned argument for enquiry into environmental history and emotion. 'Droughts bring their own sensations,' Jones reminds us: the feel of dry heat on the skin, the smell of rain, the sound of leaves crackling underfoot, even the taste of dust on the tongue. How might emotion hinder or propel change? From uncertainty to confusion, torpor to inaction, solidarity to escape, *Slow Catastrophes* brings the 'emotional landscape' of drought to the fore, through diaries making abstract speculations more personal and concrete. In turn, Jones spotlights historical cultural norms that have enabled adaptation in response: flexibility, frugality, community, emotional engagement, and humility. If at times understated in its reflective reverence of the farm diary as witness 'to the act of life being lived', her book argues that we must take seriously the role of sentiment in farming *and* in deep structural and philosophical change. This is an astute call to come to grips with the social-environmental reality of the Anthropocene and thus the dynamic ways in which climate shapes culture and culture shapes climate. ■

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Breakthroughs

Kate Griffiths

SUNLIGHT AND SEAWEED: AN ARGUMENT FOR HOW TO FEED, POWER, AND CLEAN UP THE WORLD
by Tim Flannery
Text Publishing
$19.99 pb, 181 pp, 9781925498684

The world is embarking on a journey to a clean energy future. Some places are well on their way; most have barely begun. We will all need to get there eventually. How long it takes comes down to political choices, economic realities, and technological breakthroughs. The consequences of delay are already well known. In *Sunlight and Seaweed*, Tim Flannery takes a close look at the potential solutions – the technological developments that could save us from the most dire consequences of our torrid affair with fossil fuels.

Sunlight and Seaweed is a global story and Flannery gives us the world tour – from growing truss tomatoes in the South Australian desert, to '3D ocean farming' in Long Island Sound, to steam cleaning soils in China and cleaning up the Ganges in India. He shows us how technological innovation could drive a happier, healthier, more sustainable future.

This is a small book full of big ideas. Sustainably meeting the needs of nine billion people by the latter half of this century is a complex puzzle, and Flannery quickly captures the big picture then zooms in on the missing piece. Flannery's vision hinges on cheap, reliable and renewable energy. The technologies in use today will not be sufficient, so what will be the key technologies of the future?

One of the things we will need is renewable energy that can be called on at any time. The rapid rise of solar photovoltaic technologies has been one of the major disruptive forces of the twenty-first century so far, but this is 'just the earliest development in a highly complex energy revolution'. Our most widespread renewables today are only partial solutions. What we're still missing is energy storage.

Flannery surveys the options. Battery technology, for example, is developing at a rapid rate and could soon support large-scale wind and solar farms for hours at a time. But we will need to be able to store renewable energy for weeks or even months. What role might hydrogen and concentrated solar thermal technologies play? Where do wave, tidal, geothermal, and nuclear energy fit in? The title of the book might give away the destination, but it doesn't spoil the