

Launch speech by Tom Griffiths, Readings Carlton bookstore, 17 August 2017

***Slow Catastrophes: Living with Drought in Australia* by Rebecca Jones**

Slow Catastrophes is a great title! We tend to assume that catastrophes are sudden, outside interventions in our lives, that they are definable and possibly unique cataclysmic events that happen *to us*. But what if they creep up on us, eluding definition or recognition, what if they are insidious, recurrent and cumulative over decades, shaping whole lives and landscapes, so embedded in history and natural history that the catastrophe might actually be *inside us*, in our social structures, in our own failures, in the way we think and behave? Drought challenges us like that. Rebecca's powerful phrase suggests a slow-motion disaster, an event that is not an event and a catastrophe that is not, perhaps, a catastrophe.

There is another meaning to the title that emerges as you read the book. Much social science scholarship about drought raids the past for insights. Flushed with hindsight and urgent present purpose, these scholars rush from one retrospectively-identified drought to the next, anxious to see how people behaved in crisis and reaping the fruits of reportage generated by the limelight of calamity. They find people and communities behaving in unusual ways. But what if we slowed down our inquiry to the pace of ordinary living, what if we fell in step with the actors throughout their whole lives and not only at the moments of public attention? What if we studied behaviour *between* droughts as well *during* them so that we could understand how people coped not with isolated events 'but with life-long trials'? What kind of disciplinary scholarship would enable us to do that? What kind of slowing-down of judgement would

be required, what kind of patient dedication to listening and observing over time?

Well, that's what historians do, and it's what Rebecca Jones has done marvellously in this book. She has taken the trouble – and it *is* hard, laborious work that few are able and willing to do – she has taken the trouble to find diaries that were kept by farmers for decades, in some cases more than 50 years, diaries that miraculously found their way to public archives, and then Rebecca has sat down with these journals and read them from beginning to end, day by day through the years, trying to recover the human experience of living forwards through uncertainty. She chose eight diarists from across south-eastern Australia and she got to know them like friends. Listen to how Rebecca writes about them:

I lived with the writers for months and cared about their lives. I was touched by their struggles, admired their triumphs, winced at their mistakes and was always conscious of the poignancy of lives lived and now ended. To have such an intimate picture is a seductive and vicarious pleasure but sometimes an uncomfortable one. I recall when their children were born and died, when they met their future spouses, when they argued with neighbours, when they failed to harvest a crop and when they cursed the sky. Sometimes I know more about their lives than their own descendants. Such a glimpse through another's eyes is a privilege that carries with it a responsibility to evoke their stories with sympathy and compassion as well as accuracy and dispassion.

Rebecca here describes the responsibility historians feel with their privileged access to interior lives, to intimacy. And the whole book is suffused with that care and respect. The result is a series of attentive, laconic and satisfying

portraits of whole lives on the land, and thus drought emerges as part of integrated life strategies. This is such a valuable new perspective on an iconic dimension of Australian experience.

Rebecca confessed, as we heard, that sometimes she knew more about her farmers' lives than their descendants. And it *does* rather seem as if she knows everything about them. She knows when the creek is running and the tanks are full, and she knows when the skies are a cruel blue and the earth cracks and a wild animal drowns in the well and spoils the last of the drinking water. She knows what everything costs and how they make ends meet, the frugal rhythms of the household economy, which generous neighbours might be relied upon for excellent plums, where to hunt for possums, what the farmers cook for dinner and which crops are doing well and which animals are not. She knows that when Margaret McCann arrived at her future marital home in Gippsland, a weatherboard house with a slab kitchen, she sat on the step and cried. She knows that William Pearse had the eccentric habit of weighing every Christmas cake given to him and then recording those weights in his diary, and that he had a bath once a week, on Saturday night, to be clean for the Sabbath. She knows that Charles Coote, a serious and thoughtful farmer near Quambatook, subscribed to *Hansard* and, after it was read, used it as toilet paper. This was typical of his frugality not a political statement.

So while the book is about drought, it is also about diaries, and in this sense it has happy kinship with Katie Holmes's moving 1995 book, *Spaces in Her Day*, where she studied women's diaries of the 1920s and 30s and introduced us to the role of journals in shaping lives. Rebecca does this too. 'Diaries are witnesses to life in the act of being lived', she explains. 'Diaries *show* us more often than they *tell* us about drought: they build up, day by day, month by month, year by year and decade by decade.' So Rebecca takes us to the

innocence and immediacy of being inside the slow catastrophe, free of knowing hindsight. There is an incremental organic power to the diaries that rewards attention. Rebecca went to the farmers' journals because she 'wanted to hear their words rather than interpretations mediated by institutions, experts and media', she wanted to offer a "history from below" ... which attempts to reveal the thoughts, actions and agency of "ordinary" people.' So the first half of the book goes with the flow of lived experience in particular country. Then, impressively, the second half of the book works against the grain of the diaries and of individual lives; it turns to those other perspectives and weaves reflectively back and forth across time and place, creating a national context for the personal stories.

And the weather infiltrates this book, integral to everything else, as it indeed is. It seeps into the sentences and cracks open the pages. Daily weather becomes monthly, yearly, it becomes a lifetime of weather. The internal emotional weather of the farmers rises and falls in symbiosis with the weather of the heavens; they too are air and water and heat. There is a beautiful chapter near the end of the book called 'The Feeling of Drought'. Here Rebecca explores the sensual experience of drought – through nostrils, skin, eyes, ears, even tongues – and she also makes a profound argument about why we need a history of the emotions. And thus she brings us back to the nebulous, inside nature of slow catastrophes.

A century ago in parts of Australia, drought years were eliminated from the official calculation of rainfall averages – because they were regarded as aberrant weather. We've slowly learned that drought is normal, that it is something to be expected and planned for. But I think this book takes us a further step on this path of learning. It doesn't just recognise drought as recurrent, as something that comes back; rather, it recognises – in an Aboriginal sense – that drought is

always there. I'm reminded of Heather Goodall's wonderful work on the Darling River flood plain where she found that country that floods very occasionally is always flooded in the imagination of Aboriginal people, and increasingly of white graziers. Flood is an incipient, ever-present potential of certain country, and it is the same with drought, as Rebecca shows through the eyes of her farmers learning from the land.

As well as making significant contributions to historical and literary understandings of drought, this book has strong policy relevance. Rebecca's sustained, slow-motion empirical attention to the lived experience of the past culminates in important insights into how people survived, thrived and adapted to drought; it tells us much about what resilience means. There is much wisdom here, gently offered with a scholar's delicacy, and there is some practical political philosophy too, as Rebecca's final chapter reflects on the social utility of the five historical virtues that emerge from the diaries: flexibility, frugality, community, emotional engagement and humility, the keys to adaptation that we need to recover, not just if we are to live in the El Niño continent, but also to help us cope with anthropogenic climate change.

Rebecca begins and ends her book with some words from Charlie Grossman, one of her diarists who, at the age of 15 in 1913 when his father died, suddenly became farmer of the property called 'Chatsworth' near Wangaratta. In 1914, which was a year of treacherous drought, Charlie began a diary that he kept every year until 1979. It was born as a companion to his responsibility. In the 1980s, when I was in my late twenties, I worked as a historian at the State Library of Victoria and it was my job to encourage people to donate diaries, letters, photos and archives to the library's Australiana research collections. I launched a particular campaign to collect twentieth-century diaries. I would talk to Rotary Clubs and historical societies about what happens to private,

personal records when they become part of a public state collection. They enter scholarship, I promised; they become woven into the tapestry of national history. You mightn't believe it, I would declare, but one day a historian really *will* come along who will sympathetically read every page of your ancestor's diary. So don't be modest; ordinary lives *are* extraordinary, take your place in history.

One day in the late 1980s I heard from Charlie Grossman's daughter. Her father had, during 'a gloomy phase in old age', threatened to discard his 65 years of diaries, but rather wonderfully, she had persuaded him to give them instead to the State Library. Therefore I was invited to visit Chatsworth and, after a tea ceremony, the diaries were loaded into the back of my car and, for the first time in their history, momentarily departed the land where they were created. Before I drove to Melbourne with the precious cargo, we had agreed over tea that, one day, a sympathetic historian would do the diaries justice. And so it has come to pass. Rebecca Jones has indeed done them honour – better than could have been hoped – for she has not only told Charlie's story, she has also illuminated a century of Australian history through the eyes of farmers such as Charlie, ordinary extraordinary Australians learning to live with drought. Thank you, Rebecca, for your labour of love – and our heartfelt congratulations on the publication of *Slow Catastrophes!*