

REBECCA JONES

SLOW CATASTROPHES: LIVING

WITH DROUGHT IN AUSTRALIA

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In a country with such a long history of drought it is striking how often our memories of Australian droughts are short-term and focused on the present. As many Australians grapple with our current experience of drought, Rebecca Jones' *Slow Catastrophes: Living with Drought in Australia* is a timely and important contribution. Her historical investigation of drought experiences focuses on the 1890s through to the 1940s, during the early establishment of agriculture and particularly dry years in south eastern Australia. Her focus provides a rich examination of individual and community experiences of farming during drought, revealing their strategies and processes of adaptation throughout a period of significant change and development—not just within Australian agriculture but also of understandings of the Australian environment.

Slow Catastrophes studies drought experiences through two sections, one which analyses farm diaries to illuminate personal experiences of farming during Australian drought, and the second which provides a thematic synthesis of the diaries to reveal early settlers' key strategies for

drought adaptation and resilience. Jones' focus on the period between the 1890s to 1940s—which extends back to the 1870s as required—elucidates experiences of drought during a time of agricultural change and development when people went from 'living everywhere and belonging nowhere' encouraged by 'a spirit of pioneering and exploration' to living in a settled country focused on 'establishing and inhabiting'. This cultivated a more nuanced understanding of the local environment and climate conditions, which dramatically influenced farmers' perceptions of and responses to drought (32, 269).

Section one is the centrepiece of the book and it draws extensively upon farm diaries. These sources provide crucial insights into the daily experience of drought. Drought 'is a backdrop to life in Australia' but through a detailed close reading of these diaries Jones' gives voice to personal drought experiences (xii). Seven drought stories feature farmers throughout central western New South Wales, Gippsland, the Mallee and north eastern Victoria, and the Murray Flats in South Australia. Their experiences of drought and adaptation to the local climate and environment are individual and unique, but together provide insights into a broader national story. Jones' careful diary examination demonstrates how some farmers expected regular rain and saw dry seasons as an aberration,

while others learnt to expect drought and adjusted their farming practices accordingly. Early experiences of drought informed many farmer's practices, including whether they reacted to each drought or adjusted their expectations and farming strategies to plan for irregular rain (82). The selection of diaries informs a balanced historical investigation into diverse farming experiences; from people farming on smaller blocks to large wealthy pastoralists; from families with an 'unwarranted faith in rain' to others with a heightened sense of environmental awareness and sustainability; and those who adapted by moving away to farm elsewhere (36).

The second section balances the first through a thematic interpretation of the farm diaries and additional oral history interviews conducted with more recent farmers. These thematic chapters extend Jones' analysis through a consideration of farmers' intellectual, practical, physical and emotional responses and adaptations to drought (162). Jones' discussion of wild-harvesting, self-sufficiency, and the mobility of both animals and humans as important aspects of early farmers' strategies and adaptations to drought is particularly significant.

This section is well rounded through the use of additional materials such as oral history interviews which provide complimentary and contrasting

perspectives of drought and extend the discussion to encompass more recent debates and drought experiences. They offer valuable perspectives that draw connections and demonstrate continuities between past and present farming experiences and strategies. While a more sustained consideration of the oral history interviews could have provided a more detailed insight into contemporary debates and responses to drought, the strength of *Slow Catastrophes* is the sensitive and detailed examination and interpretation of farm diaries. Rather than pursuing an overtly political agenda, the 'personal sources drive the narrative of this book' making for a compassionate yet critical examination and analysis of farming with drought in Australia (163). This intimate and personal understanding of drought is sure to resonate deeply with readers.

Jones' careful consideration of farm diaries demonstrates the value of sustained engagement and deep listening to archival sources, and provides fresh insights into Australia's drought history. The very title *Slow Catastrophes* provides a subtle challenge to disaster studies and its tendency to focus analysis of natural disasters on the immediate event. It draws attention to recurrent irregular patterns in the climate and the long-term experience of and adaptation to drought in Australia. *Slow Catastrophes* provides an important and valuable

theoretical and methodological contribution to both environmental history and the study of natural disasters. She provides voice to past and present droughts, demonstrating that 'drought is not an abstraction but a lived experience (xiii). Rebecca Jones' *Slow Catastrophes: Living with Drought in Australia* is a fine piece of historical scholarship, a timely and valuable book, and one we need as we grapple with our current experience of drought.

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