

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Tim Sherratt, Tom Griffiths, Libby Robin, eds.** *A Change in the Weather: Climate and Culture in Australia*. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2005. 216 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-876944-28-5.

**Reviewed by** Hilary Howes (Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University)

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## A Book for All Seasons

This elegant anthology captures what is best in contemporary Australian environmental history: its interdisciplinarity, its rigor, and its relevance. As co-editor Tim Sherratt points out, the influence of climate on Australia's history has frequently been neglected by historians, too often relegated to historical backdrop rather than allowed to occupy center stage. *A Change in the Weather* redresses the balance, bringing together experts from the social sciences, the humanities, science, and engineering to explore "the cultural space between weather and climate" and trace the role of climate in the construction and negotiation of Australian identity (p. 2).

The diversity of the authors' research interests is perhaps the book's greatest strength. Its sixteen chapters are linked by the broad theme of climate, and paired under more specific headings relating to seasons, rain, sun, wind, and change; but within these groupings, the perspectives represented range through every shade from the personal to the panoramic. In some cases, the essays thus paired serve to inform and elucidate one another: Bill Bunbury's dramatic presentation of Darwin residents' voices following Cyclone Tracy beautifully illustrates Tom Griffiths's meticulously documented discussion of the role of wind in the Australian imagination. Other pairings offer strikingly different takes on a single theme, with "Solar Periods," for example, covering both Janet McCalman's discussion of heat-induced infant mortality amongst poor immigrant populations in

nineteenth-century Melbourne and Ian Lowe's impassioned defence of a solar-powered future. A series of color plates featuring collection items from the National Museum of Australia illustrates the "human elements" of Australians' relationship to climate, and suggests further avenues for considering the book's main themes.

Climate change, not surprisingly, is a central topic. Its meaning and effects (past, present, and future) are considered in relation to a kaleidoscopic array of concerns, from archaeology to social psychology, sustainable energy, human health, and water management. The remaining chapters range across such topics as indigenous concepts of seasons and change; the unique behavior of Australian migratory birds; the history of Goyder's Line; the science of rainmaking; European settlers' troubled relationship with the tropics; and the discovery and evolving understandings of El Niño. Each chapter is thoroughly footnoted and generously illustrated with tables, charts, and photographic material. *A Change in the Weather* is both scholarly and accessible, refreshingly informal in style yet clearly underpinned by extensive experience and rigorous research. It speaks equally to the generalist and the specialist, to those with an interest in history and to those concerned by our ability to navigate a climatically uncertain future. This is a book for all seasons and an important contribution to our understanding of the complex and dynamic relationship between climate and culture.

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