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Iain McCalman. *The Reef: A Passionate History: The Great Barrier Reef from Captain Cook to Climate Change.* New York: Scientific American / Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. 352 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-24819-2; \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-374-71170-2.

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The tremendous seascape of the Great Barrier Reef on the northeast coast of Australia is the location of a multifaceted history of human presence: deathtrap for seafarers in the nineteenth century, refuge for castaways, spiritual homeland to Aborigines, paradise for dropouts, natural wonderland for scientists, and a continuous battlefield between conservation and economic prospecting in the twentieth century. In his book *The Reef: A Passionate History: The Great Barrier Reef from Captain Cook to Climate Change*, Iain McCalman takes us on a compelling journey to this extraordinary site and convincingly portrays the manifold history of the Reef through the lens of twenty individuals covering a time span of more than two hundred years.

Deeply inspired by the enchantments and adventures of the Reef through personal experiences as a historical consultant on a BBC reenactment tour, McCalman has crafted a thoughtful story about this place, which according to him “was built by human minds as well as by coral polyps” (p. 9). The interaction and tension between natural and mental construction accompanies the storyline of the book and comes alive through the encounters of twenty people who have shaped the Reef’s image from the time of James Cook to the present day. The selection of protagonists follows McCalman’s aim to show the great scope of motivations that have driven people to engage with this extraordinary site and to demonstrate their common ground: a passion for the Reef. Situated at the crossroads of scientific, cultural, and natural history, with biographical influences, the book is grouped chronologically around three main parts empha-

sizing different representations of the Reef, namely “Terror,” “Nurture,” and “Wonder,” each expanded upon in four subchapters.

The first part, “Terror,” explores the Great Barrier Reef through the perspective of early encounters with the Reef that emphasize its dangers, horrors, and ambivalent fascination. McCalman starts by narrating the dramatic voyage of Captain Cook’s crew through the coral labyrinth and illustrates the devastating and exhausting conditions at sea. He then depicts Matthew Flinder’s challenging and inspirational experience with the Reef within the cultural setting of English Enlightenment and Romanticism: encounters were intentionally used to “sell a sentimental, racist, and sensationalist *true life story*” (p. 76) and bolster Britain’s colonial and civilizing mission, such as Eliza Fraser’s story of a shipwreck and subsequent stay with Aboriginal clans.

The second part, “Nurture,” delves into the lives of people who voluntarily or by force made the Reef their home. Here McCalman highlights the stories of castaways and dropouts who experienced care and assistance from indigenous populations in the second half of the nineteenth century. McCalman argues that it was the constraints of mid-nineteenth-century British colonial society favoring “anti-Aboriginal sentiment” (p. 118) and sensational castaways narratives that hindered alternative and more positive images of the Reef from entering the public imagination. He illustrates this fate with the ethnographic testimony of Barbara Thompson, a young woman who was adopted for several years by a native

Kaurareg family after being shipwrecked. By analyzing the works and lives of “Australia’s first professional Reef scientist” (p. 140) William Kent and Reef-lover Ted Banfield, McCalman further shows how British-Australian awareness of the scenic beauty, scientific resources, and touristic potential of the Reef increased in the beginning of the twentieth century.

The third part, “Wonder,” emphasizes the struggle between economic, scientific, and touristic claims about the Reef in the twentieth century. McCalman demonstrates how American zoologist Alex Agassiz’s personal crusade to discredit Charles Darwin helped the Reef become a site of “global scientific prominence” (p. 187). He also points out how the scientific image of the Reef intensified through media coverage by retracing a year-long British-Australian expedition led by experimental biologist Charles Maurice Yonge. McCalman further explores the important impact of public campaigning on moral conceptions of Australian nature conservation by analyzing the environmentalist battle of Australian poet Judith Wright, artist John Busst, and forester Len Webb. Finally, it is the figure and story of Charlie Veron, the modern-day Charles Darwin of the coral reef and “prophet of its extinction” (p. 273) that McCalman uses to highlight the current image of the Reef as endangered and to plead for active optimism to confront the challenges of the future.

By combining his skills as a historian of science and

social scientist with his personal passion for the Reef, Iain McCalman has created a multifaceted history that links the surprising twists of individual destinies with a changing human imagination about the Great Barrier Reef over time. With great finesse he has interwoven scientific inquiry with cultural settings and introduced us to a wide range of European-Australian and Aboriginal protagonists. Their life stories and different motivations—scientific, economic, vital, or aesthetic reasons—make the book a lively account of the modern-day understanding of this site. McCalman’s findings from unpublished and edited material provide fresh insights into the circumstances, personal motivations, and encounters of people with the Great Barrier Reef. Although each of the interesting stories would definitely merit a book of its own, I note it is especially twentieth-century developments such as discussions of the common resources of mankind, the development of global tourism markets, the rise in global media coverage, and universal heritage declarations under the World Heritage Program of UNESCO that can provide additional insight into the staging of the Reef’s image as a global concern. However, with respect to the purpose and approach of this book, Iain McCalman has brilliantly achieved the goal of narrating the story of the Great Barrier Reef as a site that was crafted both by natural forces and human ideas. *The Reef* is highly recommended reading for all those interested in gaining insights into the manifold images of the Great Barrier Reef and the lives of the people who have produced them.

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