

Tim Sherratt, Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin, eds. *A Change in the Weather: Climate and Culture in Australia* Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press: 2005. ISBN 1-876-94428-5.

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This is a book that should win at least one of several Australian non-fiction literary awards.

The urgency of climate change is discussed via scholarship and research by historians, social scientists and scientists, with passion, polemic and poetry. The essays and their authorial voices are highly politicised, affective – and rational. The writing is terrific: lyrical and compelling, it crosses science, culture, ecocriticism, politics and history. The book's production values are concerned with aesthetics too. It's presented to look accessible: a coffee-table format with a beautiful painting on the slip cover (Mandy Martin's *Beginning of the Wet on Norwood*), a musical score on the endpapers (Jennifer Kesteven's *Historical Climate Patterns in an Aural Time Series*), dark print and attractive gloss paper inside, and earth-and-flora coloured section dividers. All this makes for a catalytic combination at a time in Australia when comment on climate change is actively suppressed by government, while comment on terrorism is promoted. It's the difference between anxiety that would be activating and anxiety that is pacifying.

The purpose of the collection is sounded out by Tim Sherratt in the opening essay 'Human Elements'. While the influence of climate has been neglected by historians, these essays show how climate and culture are mutually constitutive. However, the most surprisingly blunt, straightforward and visceral piece closes the book: 'The Social Psychology of Climate Change' by Clive Hamilton. Hamilton notes upfront that 'Australians in general, and the government ... in particular, appear to be in a state of denial' (187) about climate change, when, as Michael Smith says in his preceding essay, 'Palaeoclimates', 'the question is [not] whether climate change will occur ... but ... how soon, how fast and how far' (186). Climate change may not be incremental over a long period, but may be large, sudden and abrupt, 'with scarcely imaginable results' (190). Tony McMichael, for example, in 'Climate Change and Human Health', coolly considers the vulnerabilities of populations to the possibilities of disease, infection and epidemics. 'We appear to have passed certain critical points. In consequence our collective "ecological footprint" has become greater than the biosphere can accommodate' (141).

Hamilton describes our present moment as 'the lowest point of the contempt for Nature' by an 'economic worldview' that believes humans can manipulate 'a global ecosystem' that has taken millions of years to evolve to 'its present delicate equilibrium' (195). It's sobering to note that 'Australia's 20 million people produce more greenhouse pollution than Indonesia's 200 million' (189). Hamilton puts this down not only to our hubris, but to our cocooning from the environment, physically in air-conditioning, under roofs and electric light, behind security gates, walls and doors, but also psychically. Constantly assaulted and distracted by the mass of human-engineered activity, we have

lost our ability, Hamilton says, to be enchanted by nature. We have lost our attentiveness, our imagination, and the imagery to inspire an appropriate responsiveness.

While Hamilton discusses what to do in relation to the physical – that is, reduce the combustion of fossil fuels until they're phased out – other essays take up his challenge of the psychic. Many of the essays invoke the variable, the erratic and sporadic, 'the paradoxical and ephemeral' (49) – as Libby Robin says in her vivifying essay 'Migrants and Nomads' – as defining characteristics of Australian climate and land- and waterscapes, and under such circumstances what characterises survival is the ability to accommodate, to be nomadic, contingent, ungovernable, adaptive and opportunistic, to respond to the unpredictable. For example, the Banded Stilt refuses to conform; it is nomadic and its breeding is irregular. We have to be able to stay with possibilities and uncertainties, with connection and communication, and with 'entangled mutuality' as Deborah Rose says of Indigenous concepts of seasons and change in her essay 'Rhythms, Patterns, Connectivities'.

In considerations of risk and mess, the essays link with the work elsewhere of ecocritics such as Emily Potter of the University of Melbourne and writing also in the Ecological Humanities Corner in *Australian Humanities Review* where work by Robin and Rose, as well as Potter, appears. Hopefully this kind of writing – ecocriticism, environmental literature, nature writing: creative nonfiction in a cross-disciplinary context – will continue to build toward affect and action.

As the Pacific islanders of Tuvalu consider moving to a Fijian island because of rising sea levels, perhaps we should consider having a number of species as icons of survival, since, as Robin says, 'they can teach us much about living with uncertainty, to take opportunities as they arise, but not to expect regularity' (52). Here's to the spread of the Banded Stilt's challenging model of opportunism and nomadism, of adapting to and living with flux.