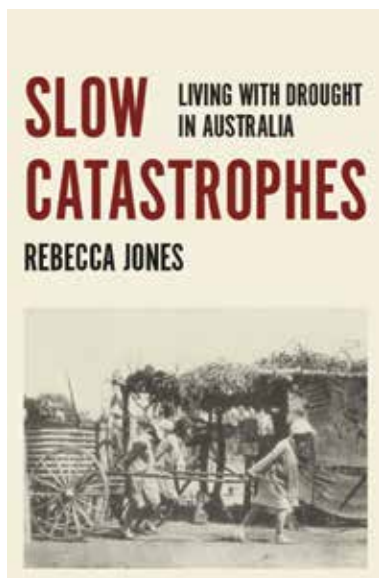


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Slow Catastrophes: Living with Drought in Australia

By **Rebecca Jones**

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Drought and its consequences have been interwoven into the fabric of the European experience of Australia since the beginning of colonisation. While Aboriginal agriculture and management of country developed food-harvesting techniques that were adapted to the climatic variability of the 'droughts and flooding rains' immortalised in Dorothea McKellar's *My Country*, British and Irish colonists and their descendants

engaged in the agricultural practices that they brought with them from northern European climates. In *Slow Catastrophes*, author Rebecca Jones has produced an engrossing social and environmental history of the experiences and adaptations of European–Australian farmers to drought, focusing on the period before Federation up to World War II, but with links to contemporary experiences and the spectre of drought compounded by anthropogenic climate change.

The book is divided into two sections. The first, 'Drought Stories,' examines the experiences of drought of seven individuals or families in south-eastern Australia, ranging from the late nineteenth century up until the 1960s, as told through their diaries and letters. Jones brings alive the responses of these varied characters to the challenges of drought, their attempts to adapt, and the successes and failures of their lives on the land. In doing so, she looks at common themes among the varied case studies—their ability to tap into social networks, the use of wild harvesting and off-farm work to support them through hard times, and their ability to learn from experience and see drought not as an exceptional event but as part of the pattern of farm life in Australia that needed to be planned and prepared for.

The second section, 'Living with Drought,' pulls the lens back from the personal stories and uses them as a springboard to a broader discussion of the themes teased out of the case studies. Jones examines how Australian farmers have dealt with the challenge of drought, including:

- changes in agricultural practices since World War II that saw a move away from wild harvesting

- the movements of farmers to more favourable locations
- the lived experience of drought for those on the land.

In this section, the diaries and letters of the first section are supplemented with oral histories, both from the descendants of some of those profiled in the first part of the book as well as government records, news reports and secondary research. Building on the observations of environmental historians such as Tom Griffiths and Don Garden, she links the changes in thinking provoked by the Federation drought to the more recent shifts brought about by the Millennium drought and the implications of a changing climate. As she writes towards the end of the book:

The environmental reality of the Anthropocene demands that we continue to pay attention to drought... We are not creatures only of contemporary reality but are connected by strong threads to the past, living its legacy and—sometimes—benefitting from its collective wisdom.

Slow Catastrophes presents a rich, thought-provoking analysis of the impacts of drought through its sensitive portraits of a diverse cross-section of the rural experience in Australia. It can provide valuable background knowledge for teaching the unit 'From Custodianship to the Anthropocene' in the forthcoming revised VCE Australian History study design, and is highly recommended to anyone with an interest Australian environmental and social history.