Disasters in Australia and New Zealand

Historical Approaches to Understanding Catastrophe

Edited by Scott McKinnon · Margaret Cook

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Editors
Scott McKinnon
Australian Centre for Culture,
Environment, Society and Space
University of Wollongong
Wollongong, NSW, Australia

Margaret Cook
School of Social Sciences
University of the Sunshine Coast
Sippy Downs, QLD, Australia

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Foreword

An Australasian book about the histories of disasters could not be more timely. Over the last southern summer, Australia became the planetary symbol of a climate-changed future, the canary in the coal mine. In a nation suffering from unprecedented extremes of heat and aridity and defiantly expanding its coal-mining and export industry, bushfires swept across vast areas of coastal and inland forest, killing people, animals and trees. Bush and city-dwellers wore face masks as smoke engulfed their neighbourhoods for months, and rural folk trucked water and hay to struggling towns and farmers. The long summer of disaster lost any definition as an event and became, instead, a new and frightening normality.

Nature and culture were so intertwined that they could not be distinguished. Bushfire is integral to Australian ecologies and human histories, but what was this? As people suffered, survived and recovered, they looked for historical understanding of their experience: about what had just happened to them and why, about what they felt and remembered, and about how others had coped with such challenges in the past. This book gathers together scholarly wisdom on these questions and offers valuable research insights that are both practical and illuminating.

Histories of disaster are often propelled by compassion, a sense of urgency and a desire to be useful in times of grief and recovery. They understandably seek 'lessons from the past'. In this way they engage directly with one of the central issues of historiography: how does a

scholar mediate responsibly between past and present, between pressing current needs and the integrity of past experience? The people who are the subjects of the scholarly studies in this volume are generally not distant and inscrutable; rather, they are living or passionately remembered and they shape or contest the histories written about them. Therefore, this is a book not only about the histories of disasters but also about disaster history, about the special challenges of writing historically about communities in crisis, even while the memories and debates are still volatile. It offers public history, oral history, environmental history and political history, seamlessly integrated as they must be and as experience testifies.

After Victoria's Black Saturday firestorm in 2009, I was a member of a team of historians invited by a small community to assist them in the disaster. We were the only emergency personnel in the district not wearing hi-vis jackets. We arrived after the first urgent wave of assistance and were struck by the community's statement that they didn't want any more material assistance, soft toys or hugs, but *did* want help in understanding and recording what they had experienced. They wanted to know what exactly happened on the day, what it all meant and how they would reinvent themselves. It was our job not to tell but to listen, and this made us unusual and useful. The chapters in this book do that essential civic and intellectual work, which remains undervalued by authorities.

Disasters are not always single recognisable events; they can be 'slow catastrophes', as historian Rebecca Jones calls droughts, their full significance sometimes identifiable only in retrospect. And they cast a long shadow, changing lives and communities forever, imprinting themselves on personal and collective memories and on patterns of commemoration. In this sense, argues Scott McKinnon, all disasters are slow. One of the impressive dimensions of this collection is the attention given to oral history and public storytelling, memorials and myth-making. Historians don't just seek out the testimony of witnesses, they also dredge the layers of interpretation and debate, oral and written, that accumulate over time. Disasters, it emerges, have after-lives that can be as disturbing as the events themselves.

Commissions of inquiry crank through their proceedings, media and governments spin their stories, and the blame game is endlessly played out; disasters distil and concentrate social debate and become political

and cultural landmarks. As studies in this book show, the meaning of a disaster changes over time under the workings of memory, history and politics, and needs to be tracked through a continuing landscape of instability. A persistent insight from disaster histories is that society finds it hard to acknowledge the sheer enduring power of nature, and prefers political and technological solutions over deeper environmental or cultural adaptations. Arsonists, greenies or dam engineers are easier to blame than poor policy, environmental ignorance or cultural blindness. People also tend to separate nature and culture and are less ready to acknowledge the complex and sometimes fatal integration of society and environment, the embedded historical patterns of settlement that can create or amplify disaster. As Margaret Cook shows in her chapter, a strong reflex exists that humans should not be defeated by nature.

Disaster histories are rarely written by historians, and more often—as Ian Townsend observes in this volume—by disaster scientists and policy wonks. Thus, they tend to cherry-pick past facts for present purpose rather than submit themselves to the contextual, immersive analysis of the historian, a method that respects the complex integrity of the past. The flawed 'Stay or Go' fire policy that condemned so many people to death on Black Saturday was founded on bad history written by non-historians.[1] It was history that reflected the tendency of disaster experts and bureaucrats to look for historical evidence that supported their preferred management policy. And the Black Saturday Royal Commission, despite its 155 days of evidence, failed to recognise this endemic problem of research because it sought advice from the very same experts, the architects of the policy, rather than from independent historians. This is a dangerous cycle that is hard to break. This book offers a way out of it, provided the distinctive skills of the historian are given due respect. As Townsend argues here, 'Remembering a disaster accurately is literally a matter of life and death.'

A further reason to seek disaster histories from historians is their inclination to listen to the voice of experience, however surprising or uncomfortable it may be. History at its best is a subversive discipline because it

[1] For further analysis, see my "The Disturbing Logic of 'Stay or Go'", *Inside Story*, 22 November 2012, https://insidestory.org.au/the-disturbing-logic-of-stay-or-go/

releases narratives that run counter to the official or dominant interpretation; they are not always right, but sometimes they contain enduring truths. For example, people who live in the firestorm forests of Victoria have developed special words and phrases for the extreme fire behaviour they have experienced. But the same experts and professionals who developed the 'Stay or Go' policy disparaged the eyewitness accounts of people who survived the firestorms of 1851, 1926, 1939 and 1983. They convinced themselves that the unrehearsed narratives of experience were actually exaggerated fictions or 'myths' that needed to be dispelled by calm professional education and fire science. As recently as 2008, thoughtful fire officers—drawing on the science of grassfires—argued that there were no such phenomena as 'exploding houses' or 'firestorms' or 'fireballs' and that these were just the delirious inventions of victims. And they suggested that such untutored and emotive words falsely implied that 'bushfire is something beyond human control'. This professional disparagement of local testimony and tragic underestimation of the power of nature clearly reveal the psychological blinkers of history done by disaster experts.

That's why this book—rich as it is with the words of witnesses and the voice of local memory—is so important. It also showcases the best new scholarship in the field by historians, bringing together work on bushfire, floods, cyclones and earthquakes. The elements once lay outside the domain of human history, set aside as 'acts of God', but now the relationships between people and nature, society and the environment, are at the heart of humanist scholarship and of our politics, both local and planetary. The Anthropocene has engulfed us and nature and culture cannot be teased apart—and histories of disaster expose that amalgam for intelligent and urgent scrutiny.

Australian National University
Canberra, ACT
Australia

Tom Griffiths

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Notes on Contributors

Deb Anderson is a writer who spent more than a decade with the independent press in Australia and overseas, writing mainly for *The Age*, before joining Monash University as a lecturer in 2013. Her research explores the lived experience of extreme weather and understanding of climate change. She is the author of *Endurance: Australian Stories of Drought* (2014). http://profiles.arts.monash.edu.au/deb-anderson/

Claire Brennan is a history lecturer at James Cook University, Townsville, where she researches the environmental history of northern Australia. She is particularly interested in the history of hunting and the way in which animals are used to create connections between people and landscapes. At present she researches the history of crocodile hunting in northern Australia, although she is engaged in writing the history of northern Australia more broadly. Her research portfolio is available at https://research.jcu.edu.au/portfolio/claire.brennan/

Margaret Cook has been a freelance historian for many years. Her environmental history PhD and subsequent book, *A River with a City Problem: A History of Brisbane Floods* (UQ 2019), explored floods and the relationship between the Brisbane River and its human riverside dwellers. Her research interests include natural disasters, water, climate and the cotton

industry. A history lecturer at University of the Sunshine Coast, she holds Honorary Research Fellow positions at La Trobe University and University of Queensland. http://margaretcookhistorian.com.au

Gretel Evans is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne and an Associate Student in the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre. Her PhD thesis draws upon oral history and memory studies to examine migrants' memories of bushfires and floods in Australia. Gretel has participated in archaeology projects in Australia and Macedonia and has worked as a consulting historian. She was an interviewer and research assistant for the YCW oral history project and a 2016 Summer Scholar at the National Library of Australia.

Karen Fisher (Māori/Pākehā/Other, iwi affiliations: *Ngāti Maniapoto, Waikato-Tainui*) is an Associate Professor in the School Environment at the University of Auckland. She is a geographer with research interests in environmental governance and the politics of resource use. Her research involves applying feminist and postcolonial theories to explore the creation and implementation of new co-governance arrangements between Māori iwi (tribes) and the New Zealand government over the management of rivers in Aotearoa New Zealand. https://unidirectory.auckland.ac.nz/profile/k-fisher

Peg Fraser is a historian from Museums Victoria who in 2010 documented the Black Saturday bushfires in the small settlement of Strathewen, Victoria. She continued her work with bushfire survivors while completing her PhD at Monash University. She is the author of *Black Saturday: Not the End of the Story* (2018). Prior to the Bushfires Collection, Peg worked across many aspects of Museums Victoria's collections and exhibitions. She has written or curated exhibitions on Victoria's migrant communities, refugees and child migrants as well as material culture collections including nineteenth-century textiles, numismatics and scientific artwork. She holds an honorary research appointment with Museums Victoria.

Rohan Lloyd is a high school teacher and historian from Townsville who researches environmental history of North Queensland and the histories of environmentalism. Rohan's major research project, and the sub-

ject of his PhD from James Cook University, is the history of the Great Barrier Reef. He was a 2015 Summer Scholar at the National Library of Australia.

Daniel May is a PhD candidate in the School of History, Australian National University, and an Associate Student in the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre. His PhD thesis investigates the historical and contemporary politics of Indigenous burning in Australia and the Western United States. In 2018 he completed an Endeavour Research Fellowship in the United States. Daniel's research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship. He regularly posts on fire-related matters at @DJMay19.

Scott McKinnon is a Vice Chancellor's Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Australian Centre for Culture, Environment, Society and Space (ACCESS) at University of Wollongong. He is an oral historian and geographer with a research background in disasters research, geographies of memory and histories and geographies of sexuality and gender. Scott's postdoctoral project focusses on collective memories of disaster in Australia. He is the author of *Gay Men at the Movies: Cinema, Memory and the History of a Gay Male Community* (2016).

Meg Parsons (Māori/Pākehā/Lebanese, iwi affiliation: *Ngāpuhi*) is a senior lecturer in the School of Environment at the University of Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. She holds a PhD from the University of Sydney and has worked at the Waitangi Tribunal in New Zealand and the University of Melbourne and Griffith University in Australia. Her research focuses on understanding the drivers and long-term consequences of social and ecological transformations to Aotearoa New Zealand freshwater systems. She is a contributing author to the Sixth Assessment of Working Group II for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). https://unidirectory.auckland.ac.nz/profile/meg-parsons

Ian Townsend holds a PhD in History from the University of Queensland with a focus on the 1899 Bathurst Bay cyclone. He worked for many years as an investigative journalist and broadcaster at ABC Radio National and is the winner of four Australian Museum Eureka

Prizes for science and medical journalism, as well as an Australian Human Rights Award. He has previously written two novels and a non-fiction book exploring three different Australian disasters.

Patrick White is a PhD candidate at James Cook University in Townsville. His research analyses how local governments in Queensland influenced post-war reconstruction and northern development in Australia. Patrick's work has been published in both academic journals and *The Conversation*. He has experienced a variety of natural disasters including Townsville's 'Night of Noah' floods in 1998 and severe tropical cyclone Yasi in 2011, and during the 2019 flooding of Townsville, his family was evacuated from their home after a landslide on a nearby mountain. Patrick also serves in the Australian Army and assisted on 'Operation Townsville Flood Assist' in 2019.

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Where the Wild Things Were

Introduction

Scott McKinnon and Margaret Cook

As we write this introduction in December 2019, large areas of eastern Australia are on fire. More than 70 bushfires are alight in New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (see Fig. 1 for all locations mentioned). Hundreds of homes have been destroyed and several people have lost their lives. Social media is permeated with photographs of flaming landscapes and frightening red skies taken from backyards or apartment balconies. Sydney's world-famous Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge are barely visible through an orange, smoke-filled sky, as residents breathe toxic air. Satellite imagery shows plumes of smoke visible from space. Downloads of a "Fires Near Me" app developed by the NSW Fire Service are skyrocketing. As co-editors, each of us working on this book is aware

S. McKinnon (✉)
University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia
e-mail: scottmck@uow.edu.au

M. Cook
School of Social Sciences, University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs, QLD, Australia
e-mail: mcook1@usc.edu.au

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Fig. 1 Map of Australian states

that our own homes are not free from risk. Margaret Cook's neighbourhood is thick with smoke from fires in nearby bushland. The region in which Scott McKinnon lives, thousands of kilometres away, has been subject to a 'Catastrophic' level fire warning. Summer has only just begun.

It seems clear that a changing climate is creating conditions of increasing risk of disaster in Australia and around the world. It also seems at least possible that these fires will finally force the Australian government into taking real action to mitigate the effects of anthropogenic climate change. While the New Zealand government has recognised this issue as centrally important to the future of its nation and neighbours, its Australian counterparts remain reluctant to do so. Perhaps these widespread fires are, at last, a catastrophe that can't be ignored. And yet, as historians of disaster, we know that once these fires are extinguished and disappear from the front pages, they will quickly seem less urgent. For the people who have lost loved ones or homes, the recovery will likely be

slow and challenging. But the rest of us will move on to new concerns, until the next time.

Those who deny the reality of climate change draw on history to bolster their claims. They argue that Australia has always experienced terrible bushfires, which is undeniably true; fire is, after all, a cyclical element of large parts of the Australian environment. But emergency management officials have described these fires as "unprecedented," urging the public to understand that increasing periods of hot weather means more days of higher fire risk, drier conditions in bushland and less time throughout the year in which to undertake mitigation strategies. Denialists also seek to blame 'green' environmental policies, claiming that the real problem is a lack of prescribed burning. Forceful opinions are expressed about burning as a fire management strategy, often by individuals with little apparent understanding of the history and complexity of this process.

In the words of sociologist Michelle Duffy and media scholar Susan Yell, "the Australian summer is framed by a narrative of bushfire."[1] Southern Australia is recognised as one of the world's worst bushfire-prone regions. With its forests of mountain ash, dependent on fire for regeneration, Tom Griffiths describes Victoria as "the most dangerous fire region on the planet."[2] While bushfires preoccupy the environmental imaginary in southern Australia's summer months, for northern NSW and Western Australia (WA), Queensland and Northern Territory (NT), those months (December to February) can also be flood season. Australia's climate is driven by the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) cycles, which loosely operate over timescales between one and eight years. The warming Pacific Ocean in La Niña years increases flood risk.[3]

In northern Queensland, NT and WA, summer is cyclone season, the time when monsoonal troughs build offshore and head towards the coast. Most summers, an average of 13 tropical cyclones (known as hurricanes

[1] Michelle Duffy and Susan Yell, "Mediated Public Emotion: Collective Grief and Australian Natural Disasters," in *Emotions and Social Change: Historical and Sociological Perspectives*, ed. David Lemmings and Ann Brooks (New York: Routledge, 2016), 99.

[2] Tom Griffiths, "An Unnatural Disaster?" *History Australia* 6, no. 2 (2009), 35.2.

[3] Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology, "What Is La Niña and How Does It Impact Australia?" 2016, http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/updates/articles/a020.shtml.

in the northern hemisphere)[4] cross the coast of northern and western Australia, and half become severe.[5] While north western Australia is the county's most cyclone-prone region, Queensland is no stranger to devastating cyclones, with 4.7 on average per year and 208 known impacts since 1858.[6] Queensland's deadliest cyclone was *Mahina* that in 1899 devastated a pearling fleet north of Cooktown (see Townsend chapter). Only the two cyclones that occurred in 1918 rival Yasi in 2011 for second position in terms of intensity.[7]

The scale of events in Australia is hard to comprehend, although examples help bring home the enormity of some disasters. On 5 January 2011 more than 78 per cent of Queensland, over 1 million square kilometres (greater than the area of France and Germany combined) was flooded, leaving 40 towns and 2.5 million people affected.[8] By 9 November 2019 (before the start of the traditional bushfire season), over 850,000 hectares of NSW had been scorched by bushfire. One fire, west of Sydney, the Gospers Mountain fire, had by 20 December 2019 destroyed an area seven times the size of Singapore. Burning in excess 444,000 hectares this "mega fire" is the largest Australian forest fire to date from a single ignition point.[9]

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[4] Cyclones are formed over the South Pacific and Indian Ocean. Hurricanes over the North Atlantic Ocean and Northeast Pacific and typhoons are over the Northwest Pacific Ocean. In the southern hemisphere they spin clockwise, anticlockwise in the northern hemisphere. All are rotating low-pressure weather systems of inwardly spiralling winds of over 104 km per hour.

[5] Bill Bunbury, *Cyclone Tracy: Picking up the Pieces* (South Freemantle, WA: Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 1994); Peter Reid, *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Sophie Cunningham, *Warning: Cyclone Tracy* (Melbourne, VIC: The Text Publishing Company, 2014); Patti Roberts, *Surviving Tracy: Cyclone Tracy Survivor Stories* (Place of publication not identified: Patti Roberts, 2015); and Julie Roberts and Martin Young, "Transience, Memory and Induced Amnesia: The Re-imagining of Darwin," *Journal of Australian Studies* 32, no. 1 (2008): 51–62.

[6] Australian Government, Bureau of Meteorology, "Tropical Cyclones in Queensland," 2019, http://www.bom.gov.au/cyclone/about/eastern.shtml.

[7] Australian Government, Bureau of Meteorology, "Severe Tropical Cyclone Yasi," 2019, http://www.bom.gov.au/cyclone/history/yasi.shtml.

[8] Catherine Holmes and Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry (QFCI), *QFCI Final Report* (Brisbane: QFCI, 2012), 32.

[9] Harriet Alexander and Nick Moir, "'The Monster': A Short History of Australia's Biggest Forest Fire," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 December 2019, https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/the-monster-a-short-history-of-australia-s-biggest-forest-fire-20191218-p53l4y.html.

Although often overlooked, Australia does not escape earthquakes, commonly associated with the earthquake vulnerability zones in WA and South Australia (SA), but includes an area from Tasmania to northern NSW. In contrast Aotearoa New Zealand is known for earthquakes, with approximately 20,000 detected annually on seismographs (and between 100 and 150 felt), the country has earned its nickname the Shaky Isles (for New Zealand locations, see Fig. 2).[10] The 7.8 magnitude earthquake that destroyed Napier and Hastings in 1931 remains the nation's deadliest, as at least 256 people died, with thousands injured. Christchurch city is still rebuilding after two severe earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 that killed 185 people and left some areas unsafe to re-enter. Situated on the boundary of two tectonic plates, New Zealand is particularly vulnerable to earthquakes, tsunami, landslides and volcanic eruptions. The constant clouds of visible gases from White Island, the bubbling mud of Rotorua in the Bay of Plenty, and the rumblings of Mt Ruapehu in the middle of the North Island are reminders of the ever-present volcanic hazard.

On average ten tropical cyclones form in the South Pacific tropics every year, any one of which may affect New Zealand bringing severe storms and floods. Cyclone Bola in March 1988 remains the most costly, causing three deaths and mass evacuations of thousands of residents in the Hawke's Bay, Gisborne and East Cape region on the North Island. Subsequent floods in the Waipoa River destroyed bridges and property. As we write, floodwaters in Wanaka and Queenstown in New Zealand's South Island are threatening properties and isolating communities. The death toll from the eruption of White Island on 9 December has reached 16 with 2 people missing. New Zealand, it seems, is also heading for a summer of disasters.

In this volume, we seek a greater understanding of the impact of these disasters on Australia and New Zealand in the hope that by building knowledge of the past we might better understand the challenges of our uncertain present. Although some disasters are recalled as significant moments in the history of each country, their historiography remains

[10] GeoNet, Geological Hazard Information for New Zealand, https://www.geonet.org.nz/earthquake/statistics [accessed 17 September 2019].

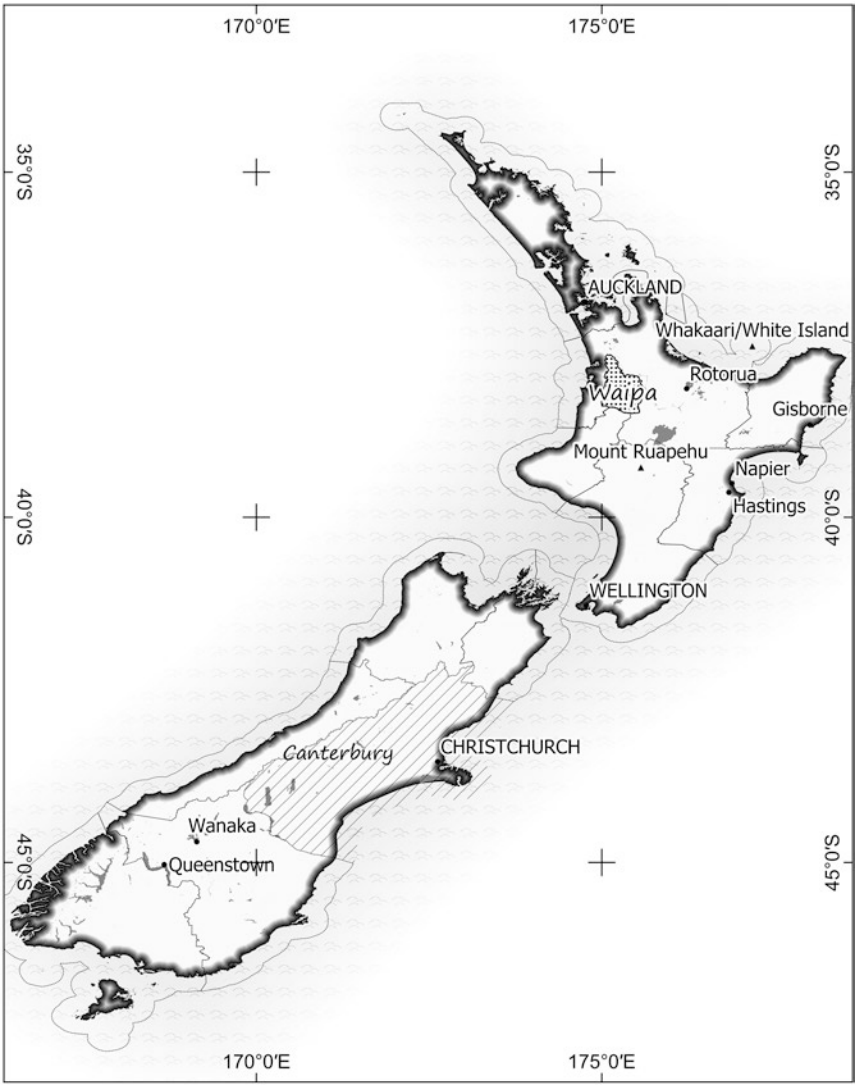

Fig. 2 Map of New Zealand