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Review of A Cultural History of Climate Change

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A Cultural History of Climate Change
Edited by Tom Bristow and Thomas H. Ford
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Reviewed by Tatiana Prorokova

Climate has informed one’s knowledge about various geographic regions for centuries. Considering the vital significance of climate for humanity, it is unsurprising that any transformations that happen within our environment become of primary interest both to scholars and to the general audience. Climate change is doubtlessly the most important of them. While numerous hard disciplines have been studying the problem of climate change, cultural studies has offered its unique view on this intricate phenomenon, examining various artifacts that not only help one understand the history of climate change but also shape it through multiple representations. In their edited collection A Cultural History of Climate Change, Tom Bristow and Thomas H. Ford provide a cultural analysis of the long and complex history of climate change. They suggest looking at the problem of climate change from a historical perspective to understand the irrevocable changes that our planet has been experiencing for centuries and rethink the notion of climate today.

The editors divide their study according to three topics, examining “climates of history,” “climates of writing,” and “climates of politics,” thus both expanding and explaining the notions of climate and climate change.

In the first part of the book, the contributors offer a comprehensive analysis of various “practices and processes that have shaped the present-day atmospheric environment” (p. 7). The essays focus on such issues as weather, seasons, geology, and pollution. Opening the first section, Deb Anderson challenges the reader to think of the co-dependency of culture and climate. Zeroing in on the problem of extreme weather, the scholar not only foregrounds the importance of oral history but also underlines the “the significance of the cultural and historical dimensions of climate” when examining the ability of oral history to “shed light on the interpretive problems of climate change” (19). Continuing to investigate cultural representations of weather, Chris O’Brien analyzes seasons though the prism of colonialism and argues that despite the existence of so-called “Western notions of time” (p. 38), the aboriginal understandings of climate, nature, and time are still relevant and they “incorporate a temporal flexibility that allows for seasons which don’t happen at an exact time, but come nonetheless in a cyclical sequence, though occasionally a
season does not come at all” (p. 39). O’Brien outlines the history of forecasting weather and accentuates the imperfection of individual interpretations which might result in dangerous misinterpretations when it comes to climate. While the weather, as the essay demonstrates, is, indeed, a crucial phenomenon to examine in relation to climate, weather changes can be only the consequences of the bigger problem – climate change. Jerome Whittington investigates the role of imagination and speculation in the measurements of the “temperature of interplanetary space” (p. 56) and the complex relationship between science and imagination when dealing with the greenhouse effect. Linda Williams’s essay touches upon similar issues although from a different perspective and examines how “social processes that emerged in the long seventeenth century from 1550 to 1750 not only exacerbated global climate change, but also provided a robust foundation for ecocritical responses to the advance of global climate change in the twenty-first century” (p. 87). Knowledge as a combination of the scientific and the imaginative is the key term in these two essays, but also in the one by Tom Bristow and Andrea Witcomb who address the problem of cultural visualization of climate change, focusing on an example of a contemporary Australian museum.

The next section of the book provides analyses of literary representations of climate change to highlight the power of writing to deal with the problem of climate. From the fictions of the Enlightenment to Victorian literature and beyond, the contributors in this section examine the connection between literature from various periods and the scientific views on climate change that existed in those times. The contributions in this section are made by Jayne Lewis, Karen Pinkus, Roslyn Jolly, and Thomas H. Ford, and analyze various narratives, among which are Helen Simpson’s short-story cycle In-Flight Entertainment, Zola’s Germinal, Upton Sinclair’s King Coal, Robert Louis Stevenson’s “Ordered South,” and Henry James’s “Daisy Miller” and “Longstaff’s Marriage,” to understand how literature constructs one’s cultural understanding of climate through the portrayals of human and nonhuman lives. The section concludes with Ford’s investigation of climate history through literary history. Ford demonstrates the intricate and tight bond between such notions as “climate” and “meaning” (p. 157), and reveals climate “as a central category of cultural understanding in the naturalist model of literary history proposed by Hippolyte Taine” that is still crucial in literary studies (p. 10).

The final section of A Cultural History of Climate Change provides a historical overview of how climate change has influenced politics and vice versa. Here, the scholars, among whom are Nick Mansfield, S. Romi Mukherjee, Nicole Rogers, and Timothy Morton, examine such issues as sovereignty, eco-nihilism, apocalypse, activism, and lawfulness to portray climate change as,
indeed, a global phenomenon, to reveal the current ideological views on climate change, and to
demonstrate how climate change and various cases of political injustice have been made invisible
throughout history. The section unveils political, social, and cultural dimensions of climate change
and outlines them as the key trajectories to understand climate change both as a current and a
long-existing phenomenon.

A Cultural History of Climate Change is a unique piece of scholarship, for it analyzes the
issue of climate change from three significant perspectives: historical, literary, and political. The
successful attempt to compile various views from the humanities on climate change makes this
edited collection an outstanding academic achievement. Due to its didactic quality, the book is an
important contribution to the existing scholarship on climate change, for only being fully informed
about the problem humanity can find ways to solve it. A Cultural History of Climate Change will
be of interest to academics and students in the fields of environmental history, ecocriticism,
political science, and cultural studies, as well as to anyone who wants to learn more about history
and culture of climate change.