

needs to act to ward off the worst of projected climate change outcomes. Following some useful syntheses of the physical impacts of projected climate change in Australia, including sobering assessments of the situation facing different ecosystems, Gergis provides high-level overviews and broad endorsement of the 'symbolic start' provided by the Paris Climate Agreement. But rather than discuss adaptation solutions – as may have been expected given the book's focus on climate (change) impacts and silence about sources of greenhouse gases – it turns to the question of emission mitigation.

Here, despite decent overviews of recent developments in Australia, Gergis stumbles on the over-trodden step from climate science to climate solutions. As social science and humanities scholars such as myself frequently argue, the latter requires a deep, critical understanding of society; deeper than provided by Gergis's calls for government action, technological innovation, and individual-level reconnection with nature. While all of these things are undoubtedly required, on their own they obscure the power of more important factors, namely corporate capitalism's ongoing frontier logic of expansion, extraction, and externalisation, which is – the book might have noted – inseparable from the settler colonialist project that led to temperate climate Britons struggling with the more tempestuous Australian climate in the first place.

This is the silence in *Sunburnt Country* that I felt most keenly. The very act of colonialism and the related effort to create a new territory, settlement, and node in the imperial economy were climate-changing acts. *Sunburnt Country* left me hungry for a parallel, intersecting history of Australia's emissions and climatic interventions; a history not of just a young nation's struggles with a seemingly capricious, volatile climate, but of the longer, uneven, embedded engagement of Indigenous and settler populations with 'the environment' (broadly defined), of which atmosphere and climate are a part. At a time when prime ministers continue to exploit Dorothea Mackellar's patriotic poem about Australia's sunburnt character to

explain away 'natural disasters' such as the Tathra fires – disasters covered with human fingerprints at multiple levels – we need to reboot Australia's climate re-education. The first, ongoing lesson is to appreciate that extreme climate variability in Australia is natural, normal, and inevitable; a message *Sunburnt Country* contributes to. But, as the book also indicates, a second lesson is now also needed: the fact that the climate is not just variable but the whole climate envelope is now shifting. A 'new normal' is emerging but the reasons are neither natural nor inevitable. To understand and address the latter we need to return to Britain and Europe more broadly, not to unpack the climate assumptions the early settlers brought with them, but to understand why they were heading off to settle a new continent in the first place. We need to return to the industrial revolution, the scientific revolution, the rise of the Anglosphere, and the

birth of the corporation. We need to trek back beyond the mid-twentieth-century 'Great Acceleration' in consumption rates and carbon dioxide concentrations that Gergis refers to, to the industrial revolution, the sixteenth-century emergence of the Capitalocene, and the idea that to be productive is to extract value from other bodies, things and places.

Understanding these longer histories requires socio-political literacy more than scientific literacy. At multiple levels, *Sunburnt Country* assists greatly with the latter. More importantly, though, it opens the way for subsequent, more critical analysis of the relationship between the ongoing settler colonial project and climate change. ■

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## The caper, the winds, the walks

*An inspiring look at the Southern Ocean*

Paul Humphries

WILD SEA: A HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN OCEAN  
by Joy McCann

NewSouth, \$32.99 pb, 256 pp, 9781742235738

**I**cebergs loom large in Joy McCann's *Wild Sea: A history of the Southern Ocean*. They are one of the most recognisable features of the higher latitudes of the Southern Ocean and the one that people often look forward to the most when voyaging south for the first time. Ice gets its own chapter in an inspiring book that spans the geologic and human history of this great swath of howling, tide-swept body of water that girdles the world.

The Southern Ocean lies south of all the other major oceans – the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian – between Antarctica and Australia, South Africa, South America, and New Zealand. It streams along just south of the notoriously

treacherous continental capes, where oceans mix and mountainous seas have devastated shipping for centuries. Several remote sub-Antarctic islands – Kerguelen, South Georgia, Heard, Macquarie, among others – feel the force of the Southern Ocean's tides and bear the brunt of its winds. Only cold-adapted animals like penguins, seals, whales, and krill thrive in such extreme climates. Scientists have felt the lure of the Southern Ocean for centuries and still visit its islands and the Antarctic Peninsula each year. They and, increasingly, tourists now dominate the human presence in this remote region of the earth, where sealers and whalers once plundered and became rich.

*Wild Sea* is organised thematically: 'Ocean', 'Wind', 'Coast', 'Ice', 'Deep', 'Current', and 'Front'. In each, McCann weaves vignettes of Southern Ocean exploration, experience, and exploitation into chapters, some tight as sailcloth, others a little looser. The book's breadth – philosophy, science, literature, natural history, fishing, hunting, commerce – is greater than its depth, clearly targeting a general audience. Chapters as themes was a bold choice. A chronological narrative of human contact with the Southern Ocean would have been safer and avoided the repetition that was inevitable as characters appear and reappear in different contexts. But I was always impressed by how McCann effortlessly structures the narrative of each theme.

The human history and contemplation of the Southern Ocean goes back almost two thousand years, as philosophers grappled with how the earth maintained its equilibrium, speculating that a great southern land counterbalanced the land masses in the northern hemisphere. The British, Dutch, and French sent out ships in the eighteenth

century in search of such a land. One of these was the *Endeavour*, commanded by James Cook. These seafarers risked death and discovered not the hoped-for land but bitter cold, extreme weather, and 'prodigious' waves that dwarfed anything experienced before.

Map-making and wind charts followed closely after early voyages, and these were especially useful for ships transporting people to the new colony of Australia. It was soon realised that harnessing the power of the winds of the 'Roaring Forties' (latitude 40–50 °S) and 'Furious Fifties' (latitude 50–60 °S) could mean the trip from England to Adelaide was reduced to just over two months. This eased the process of colonisation and enhanced the potential for remote industries like sealing and whaling.

McCann writes at length on the harvesting of marine resources, especially in the chapter 'Current'. This was for me the most comprehensive, insightful, and compelling topic in her book. Currents, especially those that up-well nutrient- and food-rich water from

the ocean's depths, are what drives food webs that once supported countless seals and whales. The sealing and whaling industries took off in the early 1800s. By 1911–13, whalers around the Antarctic Peninsula, South Shetland, South Orkney, and South Sandwich islands alone were killing more than ten thousand whales annually. This increased with each year, aided by the introduction of more efficient harpoon technology and factory ships. As whale numbers decreased, efforts intensified, but whaling became less and less economic. Neverthe-

less, it took until 1982 for the international moratorium on commercial whaling to be ratified. The impacts of this slaughter on the Southern Ocean and its wildlife are still being felt to this day.

Although the plunder that went on paints an indelible, blood-red stain on the history of the Southern Ocean and its islands, the more edifying riches that were gained by adventure and science are at the vanguard of *Wild Sea*. The cast of characters that sailed from obscurity into notoriety are many. Anyone with a little history will recognise names like Douglas Mawson, James Clark Ross, Robert Falcon Scott, and Ernest Shackleton. The names of scientists may be less well-known, but McCann describes their achievements with equal passion. McCann also draws our attention to the oft-neglected women whose contributions include, but are not limited to, the mapping of the sea floor (Marie Tharp), marine biology (Isobel Bennett, Mary Gillham, Susan Ingham, and Hope Black (née Macpherson), and conservation (Rachel Carson).

At times I wanted to hear more stories of the characters who populate the history of human experience in the Southern Ocean. The Southern Ocean apparently selects for extremophiles, which makes for great storytelling. Some of my favourites were the participants in the 'Sunday Times Golden Globe Race': a solo, non-stop, round-the-world race that began in Britain in 1968. Participants variously retired, lost interest, or committed suicide as the race slowly turned to farce. Only Robin Knox-Johnston completed the race, ten months after he set out. But as I read, I realised that people are mere supporting cast in a much larger production. The real heroes in *Wild Sea* are the capes, the winds, the mountainous waves, the remote islands, as well as the seabirds, the seals, and the whales of the Southern Ocean. And, of course, the icebergs. ■

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