Essay

The Climates of the Victorian Novel: Seasonality, Weather, and Regional Fiction in Britain and Australia

PHILIP STEER

> Was such a change in the seasons credible, and could all his stretch of luxuriant prairie turn into dust and ashes? . . . [A]s to any total disappearance of pasture, any ruinous loss of stock, such he had never witnessed and was quite unable to realize.
>
> —Rolf Boldrewood, *The Squatter's Dream: A Study of Australian Life* (1875)

The nineteenth century's thorough implication in the Anthropocene, and in the origins of climate change in particular, has intensified the question of how we read Victorian literature in the light of the present moment.[1] "Only now is it becoming apparent what it really meant to burn coal and send forth smoke from a stack in Manchester in 1842," Andreas Malm observes, arguing that it is imperative to revisit the scenes where "the fossil economy was established, entrenched and expanded" (5). Victorian studies's claim on the Anthropocene is, to borrow the words of Steve Mentz, both "analytically useful and self-aggrandizing" (xii): in positing that this fraught modernity has a nineteenth-century origin, it also treats the Victorians as our troubled contemporaries. This historical framing has accorded with an emphasis on a "new order of time consciousness," influenced especially by Dipesh Chakrabarty's essays on historiography in the Anthropocene, which has set much of the agenda for critical engagement with climate change (Baucom and Omelsky 12). Questions of scale, causality, change, and periodization are now being engaged by Victorian studies, informed by a sense that "conventional notions

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of past, present, and future" are no longer applicable (Miller, "Climate Change" 539). Alongside these complex issues of temporality, however, the question of spatiality has received far less attention: Put most simply, what does it mean to focus on *British* literature? Such a question may seem at best counterintuitive, given Malm's assertion that the "origins of our predicament must be located on British soil," as the ground zero of the modern fossil fuel economy (13). Yet the considerable lag between Victorian-era carbon emissions and the emergence of scientific consensus around climate change, coupled with the recognition of climate change's differing regional impacts, suggests the value of considering more closely the actual climates that shaped our nineteenth-century archives.

Criticism of the novel is also increasingly attending to the embedding of climate awareness and experience at a formal level. Adam Trexler claims that "climate change necessarily transforms generic conventions," but he finds a kind of formal inertia at work in realism that has seen it fail to adapt to this need (14). Pointing to the absence of a "realist climate change novel" from the 1970s through the 1990s, he suggests that climate change "stubbornly resisted" realist narration because of the "uncomfortable gaps between recognizable realism and global warming's forceful reconfiguration of late-twentieth-century ways of life" (223, 224). Those perceived failings of present-day realism have been attributed most forcefully to their origins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Ghosh views the emergence of realism as a calamitous accident of timing, for this "grid of literary forms and conventions . . . came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth" (7). Ghosh's autopsy of realism is thus a dismemberment of the rise of the novel: he finds the focus on the bourgeois individual comes at the expense of collectivity and the nonhuman; its constrained settings and time frames are deemed blind both to global connections and to geological time; and its fetishizing of plausibility renders it unable to comprehend nature as catastrophic or unpredictable. The kinds of literary form that might offer what Nathan K. Hensley describes as "models for thinking, and, as such, resources for engaging the present" ("After Death" 400) must be found, according to Ghosh, almost anywhere other than in metropolitan realism: in other genres—poetry, non-Western epic, genre fiction—and on empire's peripheries, where "those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us" (62–63). Yet rather than dismiss the nineteenth-century novel as an act of climate denial *avant la lettre*, because of its purported abstraction from the complexities of the natural world, I localize British realism—and our claims about it—by approaching it as the product of a particular climate.

The impact of climate on the form of nineteenth-century British realism is especially evident in the regional novel, which places annual seasonal progression at the center of temporality, plot, and character. Criticism has tended to regard seasonality as simply a facet of the regional novel's understanding of traditional social forms—the background hum of "an immemorial seasonal cycle of agricultural labor" (Duncan 321)—yet those familiar patterns of annual change stabilize representations of the individual and the nation through a logic of predictability and periodic recurrence. Thus, in Elizabeth Gaskell's "Condition of England" novel, *North and South* (1855), which encapsulates its idea of the nation in the contrasting regional cultures of the southern hamlet of Helstone and the bustling northern mill town of Milton-Northern (Manchester), the seasons mark the passage of time and explicate character norms in both places. Hence, one chapter begins, while its protagonist is in a state of despondency, "So the winter was getting on, and the days were beginning to lengthen, without bringing with them any of the brightness of hope which usually accompanies the rays of a February sun" (342). At a broader level, the centripetal forces of industrialization that both fascinate and trouble the novel are ultimately held in check in part by the continued regularity of the seasons: alongside the pressures of personal and societal change, "Nature felt no change, and was ever young" (385). The structural role of the seasons can be better

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understood in the light of Franco Moretti's neoformalist account of literary geography in *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900*. Just as climate is often assumed to be a "backdrop" to the nineteenth-century novel (Markley 17), so, Moretti points out, has geography often been seen as "an inert container, . . . a box where cultural history 'happens,'" whereas in fact it is "an active force, that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth" (3). In response, Moretti posits the "place-bound nature of literary forms"—the idea that genres have distinctive geographies and spatial horizons—and proposes that plot be understood in terms of its spatial logic (5). While Moretti emphasizes the economic and political production of literary space, and its articulation through character mobility, such an analysis implicitly points to the climate's similarly "place-bound" role in shaping the regional novel.

Claims about the stability of the British climate are, however, immediately confronted by myriad representations of unpredictable or unseasonable weather. After all, Gaskell's novel also mentions a period of "untimely wintry weather, in a late spring" (420), while a contemporaneous summation of meteorological knowledge asserts, as one of its few "settled" principles, "The weather of the British islands is so irregular from unforeseen causes that predictions as to its condition are only warrantable in very general terms at any season of the year" (Chambers and Chambers 280). More than merely offering generic seasonal references, however, the regional novel actively conceptualizes a fundamental yet wide-reaching distinction between climate and weather that was also of increasing interest to scientists of the period. "[T]he most indistinct and confused ideas are still commonly enough entertained about weather," observed David Ansted and Robert Drummond in an 1860 essay in the *Cornhill Magazine*: "It is often mistaken for climate, and climate is confounded with it" (565). Weather is immediate, particular, and changeable, they argue, "essentially the state of the air at the place and time of observation"; by contrast, climate is orderly and abstract, "the general average of the weather for a country or district" (566, 567). Indeed, Katherine Anderson locates the emergence of a recognizably modern meteorological science at the beginning of the Victorian era and suggests it was only in the 1870s that weather scientists could begin "the orderly pursuit of climatological laws" based on the averaging of long-term meteorological data (236; see also Heymann 588). Yet even with these sciences in their infancy, the Victorians lacked neither weather insights nor climate knowledge. Weather rules were codified in a diverse array of publications, notably almanacs and agricultural manuals, which conveyed a sense of climate's seasonal regularity through "a catalogued 'folk' wisdom whose content persisted unchanged over the centuries" (Janković 130). Even as meteorologists and climatologists struggled to differentiate their predictive work from that of the so-called weather prophets that flourished in the almanacs, both scientific and folk weather knowledges proceeded from a common belief that the British climate was ordered, regular, and knowable.[2]

If recognizing the formal implications of such "place-bound" climate knowledge contributes to the "worlding [of] realisms" called for by Lauren Goodlad, by "locating the spatiotemporal coordinates of particular realist innovations," such an effort is cast into even greater relief by also considering the regional novel as it emerged in colonial Australia (184). The settler colonization of Australia is of particular interest because it was predicated on the transplanting of British weather expectations—scientific, folkloric, novelistic—in order to replicate Victorian society through the establishment of a pastoral economy. Sheep farming had driven the expansion of the Australian frontier since the 1820s, when so-called squatters (large-scale pastoral leaseholders) and their flocks left the environs of Sydney to invade the grasslands beyond the Blue Mountains: some fifteen million sheep were grazing an area of fifty-five million acres across New South Wales by the early 1850s (Greasley 152–53; Lennon and Pearson 19–39). The early publication of colonial almanacs testifies to settler expectations that Australia's weather ought to conform to regular and predictable patterns of annual sequential change along British lines (O'Brien 205). "Their own local weather-knowledge was situated elsewhere; their informal practice suited

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to different weather conditions" (Douglas 15). Such sanguine expectations were soon in question, however, on "the only continent on Earth where the overwhelming influence on climate is a non-annual climatic change"—namely, the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO): a complex phenomenon not understood by science until the mid–twentieth century, its most recognizable signature in Australia is unpredictable, severe, and long-lasting drought (Flannery 81). Mike Davis summarizes ENSO as displaying a "complex quasi-periodicity," as well as a high degree of variability, so that "each El Niño is a distinctive, even eccentric, historical event" (240, 241). In keeping with this, Indigenous Australian notions of seasonality are "irregular in their timing, irregular in their duration and heralded by constellations of nonmeteorological events in the natural world. . . . Indigenous seasons, then, do not happen at particular times, but in specific sequences" (O'Brien 198). By contrast, the official meteorologist of the colony of Victoria, R. L. J. Ellery, confessed in 1877 to "the apparent hopelessness" of scientific attempts to discern "the probable characteristics of coming seasons," even as he noted its economic importance: "one of the chief, if not the chief, object in instituting meteorological observations in any country at the public cost, may be assumed to be climatology . . . perhaps most of all, for agricultural purposes" (11). Ellery's stress on the overlapping of climate and economics at the scene of agricultural production points to the regional novel, with its concern for rural societies and environments, as an important site for the mediation of those concerns in Australia as well as Britain.

The climatic underpinnings of Victorian literature can be glimpsed through the contrasting forms taken by the regional novel in a canonical British example of the genre and in a less familiar example from Australia: Thomas Hardy's drama of harvest and speculation in Dorsetshire, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), and a saga of pastoralism in Australia's inland Riverina region, *The Squatter's Dream* (1875), by Rolf Boldrewood (the penname of Thomas Alexander Browne). Hardy's protagonist, Michael Henchard, is famously undone as an agrarian merchant when he ignores the advice of the local weather prophet, but the uncertainties of the Casterbridge weather are nevertheless framed within an overarching vision of seasonal stability. In addition, the success of Henchard's competitor, Donald Farfrae, highlights the role of finance in mediating the experience of weather, especially as the narrative frames those past events in contrast to the "equable days" that followed the separation of British consumers from "local conditions" due to the abolition of the Corn Laws (Hardy 183). Weather challenges play out on an altogether different scale in Boldrewood's *The Squatter's Dream*, which recounts the fate of a prospective pastoral magnate, Jack Redgrave, who seeks his fortune in Australia's arid interior only to become caught in the stasis of a multiyear drought: without any certainty as to the area's climatic norms, neither protagonist nor plot prove able to develop as expected. At the same time, the novel portrays credit as enabling a form of climate denial—Redgrave's ruin only comes about when the drought eventually intersects with a broader financial crisis, producing a "general loosening of the foundations alike of pastoral and commercial systems" (Boldrewood 219–20).[3] Boldrewood's relocation of the regional novel demonstrates one way in which Victorian literature was remade by climate uncertainty, as the foundering of seasonal expectations is made manifest in form as well as content. Approached under the broad auspices of the Anthropocene, in other words, the Victorian settler empire provides an arena where the nineteenth-century novel can be seen engaging directly with some of the most pressing environmental concerns and compromises of our own moment.

British Climate Knowledge and Regional Fiction

"Literary historians and critics agree," Ian Duncan has argued, "that a kind of fiction distinguished by its regional or provincial setting flourished in the nineteenth century" (321). Duncan influentially attributes the rise of such novels, and the shifting balance between their regional and provincial variants, to the changing status of British national identity. Although the generic provincial locations of George Eliot or Anthony Trollope contrast with the distinctive

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regional settings of Emily Brontë's Yorkshire or Thomas Hardy's Wessex, they share a sense of temporal difference from the nation's metropolitan centers. Their common theme, Duncan asserts, is the disappearance of traditional economic structures and social formations: "Historical change—modernization—is the condition through which the province or region becomes narratable: as an island, or reef, in a rising tide of wholesale economic and social transformation" (323–24). One consequence of focusing so intently on this regional-metropolitan dichotomy, and of framing it in terms of temporal difference between tradition and modernity, has been the occlusion of an earlier critical vocabulary that defined such novels more directly in terms of the pastoral tradition and the rhythms of agricultural production. Writing in 1974, for example, Michael Squires canvassed alternatives such as "*rural novel*, . . . *bucolic novel*, *georgic novel*, or *lyrical rural novel*" before settling for "pastoral novel" (4).[4] Such superseded genre designations provide a useful reminder that the Victorian regional novel is aligned with the rhythms of an annual seasonal cycle, albeit with varying degrees of self-consciousness. Those seasonal experiences undoubtedly have marked local qualities: as the protagonist points out in R. D. Blackmore's *Lorna Doone* (1869), comparing Southern England to the "extremes" of its Exmoor setting, "Their sky is a mother to them; but ours a good stepmother to us—fearing to hurt by indulgence, and knowing that force, and change of mood, are wholesome" (106). Nevertheless, seasonal progression is a constant, whether in *Lorna Doone*'s detailed accounting of agricultural labor, where each year "the sheep-shearing came, and the hay season next, and then the harvest of small corn . . . and then the sweating of the apples . . . and the stacking of the firewood" (75), or in the regular yielding of winter's intensity to the "sweet, warm weather" of spring in *Wuthering Heights* (1847; Brontë 305). Brian H. Mottram long ago lauded Hardy as the regional novelist who took most care to "mention the . . . prevailing weather conditions" (41), and Elizabeth Carolyn Miller has more recently drawn attention to the "bioregional ethic" that permeates the Wessex novels ("Dendrography" 699). It is in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* that the regional novel offers its most sustained and nuanced engagement with Britain's weather and climate. In addition to performing the conceptual work of articulating a relation between the volatility of the weather and the known patterns of seasonal progression, Hardy highlights the extent to which capital mediates the experience of both—all within the bounded context of the British climate.

From its first words—"One evening of late summer"—until its last chapter, when Elizabeth-Jane arrives at "a latitude of calm weather," *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is permeated by a tangible awareness of weather and climate (Hardy 3, 322). As the opening chapter follows the path taken toward the annual Weydon-Priors fair by Henchard; his wife, Susan; and their infant daughter, the regional setting is cast as quintessentially English:

> [T]he scene . . . being one that might have been matched at almost any spot in any county in England at this time of the year. . . .
>
> [T]he voice of a weak bird singing a trite old evening song . . . might doubtless have been heard on the hill at the same hour, and with the self-same trills, quavers, and breves, at any sunset of that season for centuries untold. (4–5)

Ralph Pite has discussed Hardy's "many-sided and complex" deployment of such images of rural timelessness (57), but the impression of traditional society's persistence is founded on confidence in the seasons' regular recurrence "for centuries untold." This continuity is readily apparent when, returning to these characters almost two decades later, we seem to be meeting them on "the afternoon following the previously recorded episode" (19). Yet from this point onward, as the novel takes up a later moment in the social life of Casterbridge, the untrustworthiness of the Wessex weather becomes more apparent. Now a wealthy grain merchant, Henchard attempts to blame the weather for his flooding of the local market with bad corn. "You must bear in mind," he angrily informs the town's tradespeople, "that the weather just at the harvest of that corn was worse than we have known it for

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years" (36). Meteorological difficulties of this kind will later plague him with even greater force as he engages in increasingly heated competition with his former corn factor, the modernizing Donald Farfrae. When both organize competing public entertainments on the occasion of a royal visit, Henchard is humiliated after planning an open-air event on the mistaken assumption of "the continuance of a fair season" (102). More seriously, his attempt to destroy Farfrae by cornering the corn market hinges on accurately reading the weather, leading him to seek out the local weather prophet, who foretells a catastrophically wet harvest period. Indeed, all the residents of Casterbridge and its environs are "practised in weather-lore," because their livelihoods depend in one way or another on the success of the harvest (260). The starkly differing perspectives on atmospheric qualities encompassed by Hardy's plot—uncertain or stable, freakish or typical—amount to an extended analysis of the conceptual and experiential difference between Britain's weather and its climate.

Through its pervasive weather awareness, the regional novel brings to the fore long-standing questions of realism's commitment to probability that have gained new urgency because of climate change. Bill McKibben has argued that the climate's "very predictability" in the Holocene "has allowed most of us in the Western world to forget about nature" (89). Ghosh similarly charges that realism's commitment to a bourgeois "calculus of probability" has smoothed out its vision of the natural world and overlooked the potential for unpredictable or catastrophic weather events, such that "the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real" (23). In fact, a more complex understanding of the probability of natural events prevails in the regional novel whereby "unseasonable" weather is depicted within an overarching context of climatic stability. For example, key events in *Lorna Doone* take place in the midst of the Great Frost of 1683–84, a winter "as we had never dreamed of, neither read in ancient books, or histories of Frobisher," which kills people, animals, and trees alike (Blackmore 339). Yet as the intense cold dissipates, the regular rhythms of agricultural life soon resume: despite the recent "extraordinary weather," characters are still willing to "trust the climate" because it "always contrives to come right in the end" (375). If Blackmore's protagonist is unwilling to offer a reason for such events, beyond acknowledging their rarity, regional novels set squarely in the nineteenth century more actively rationalize weather extremes through the idea of periodic recurrence. At least since Luke Howard's *A Cycle of Eighteen Years in the Seasons of Britain* (1842), meteorologists actively sought to determine the existence of multiyear patterns that could explain weather variations: as the physicist and astronomer J. Norman Lockyer advised, "Surely in meteorology, as in Astronomy, the thing to hunt down is a cycle. . . . [A]nd if found, then above all things, and in whatever manner, lay hold of, study it, record it, and see what it means" (424–25). A cyclical logic of this kind surrounds the catastrophic flood that concludes Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1880), which Hensley points out has generally been read as a failure of form, "a random occurrence from the genre of romance infiltrating this otherwise respectably probable realist novel" (*Forms* 64). Yet far from being sui generis, the flood is shown to be a familiar and anticipatable phenomenon, albeit recurring over such a broad time scale as to escape all but the lengthiest of memories: "[T]he old men had shaken their heads and talked of sixty years ago, when the same sort of weather, happening about the equinox, brought on the great floods, which swept the bridge away, and reduced the town to great misery" (Eliot 531). Similarly, Ansted and Drummond's essay on weather, written in the aftermath of the so-called *Royal Charter* Storm of November 1859,[5] is keen to assert that "marked peculiarities of weather must not . . . be assumed too hastily to indicate any change of climate," because "the general fact of periodicity of weather is clearly established" (574, 575). Such confidence in the "periodicity of weather" allowed calamitous weather events to be encompassed within the probabilistic seasonal framework of realism.

Beyond simply articulating a connection of weather, climate, and culture, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* stands out among other regional novels for

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its attention to the ability of economic systems to mold the perception of weather and climate. Weather expertise is not just one dimension of the local knowledge that distinguishes the natives of Wessex, "a knowledge, and a way of knowing, so intense, so full, so detailed, that it cannot be acquired in more places than one, and cannot be exported from one place to another" (Barrell 101); rather, it is singled out because of its economic centrality in an agricultural society, and indeed its importance for sheer survival. In Wessex, the narrator reflects, the farmer is "a sort of flesh-barometer": "The farmer's income was ruled by the wheat-crop within his own horizon, and the wheat-crop by the weather" (Hardy 183). Yet the novel points to the ability of capital to reshape even that seemingly elemental relation. Seen from this perspective, the plotting of Farfrae's rise and Henchard's fall, and the establishment of "scales and steelyards . . . where guesswork had formerly been the rule," becomes a tale of capital's ability to intensify or diminish the immediate experience of weather variability (219). Henchard's drastic attempt to monopolize the corn market is ultimately doomed not by the weather itself, or by his lack of faith in the weather-prophet's prognostication, but by the intensification of his exposure to the immediacy of weather's effects due to the limitations of his credit. Having overextended himself purchasing large amounts of last season's corn in anticipation of the predicted deluge, Henchard finds "settlement could not long be postponed," even though this coincides with a spell of good weather that brings about a temporary drop in prices (188). Farfrae's contrasting financial circumstances produce a wholly different experience. Stronger credit allows him to take a longer-term view, overlooking the real-time fluctuations of weather and instead acting in accordance with the known stability of the climate, "sufficient to pile for him a large heap of gold where a little one had been" (190). Yet while the younger man's triumph is generally read as evidence of a middle-class reorganization of society and the economy, the novel locates both Henchard and Farfrae on the far side of a more fundamental shift in British climate perception caused by economic modernization.

The minute attention paid in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to the difficulties of seasonal agricultural production is carefully ascribed by Hardy to the bygone era of the Corn Laws, when the British market was protected against the import of foreign grain. "Prices were like the roads of the period," the narrator observes, "steep in gradient, reflecting in their phases the local conditions, without engineering, levellings, or averages" (183). While the plot unfolds during a time when, as Genevieve Abravanel puts it, "the local atmosphere is inseparable from a localized economy" (100), the novel's framing contrasts this with a later form of capitalist modernity that has had a similarly "levelling" effect on British perceptions of weather and trade. Hardy further emphasized this distinction in a preface he wrote for the novel in 1895: "Readers of the following story who have not yet arrived at middle age are asked to bear in mind that, in the days recalled by the tale, the home Corn Trade, on which so much of the action turns, had an importance that can hardly be realized by those accustomed to the sixpenny loaf of the present date, and to the present indifference of the public to harvest weather" (379). Hardy positions the late-Victorian readers of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as the inheritors of this financialized "indifference," which has seemingly rendered the experience of weather's visceral importance as archaic as Henchard's "primitive, personal and despotic form of doing business" (Moses 187). The broader implication of Hardy's comment is that British literature as a whole was increasingly pervaded by a similar sense of climate stability as the century progressed, as the growth of a capitalist economy brought about this abstraction from the particularities of local weather. Jesse Oak Taylor observes, "Climate is a discourse of limits. . . . In ecological terms, climate refers to the dominating atmospheric conditions, the limits of what can be expected to occur in a given region or season; in cultural or historical terms, climate delimits what can be thought, said, and done in a given place and time" (13). The regional novel's faith in the seasons, I suggest, is the most legible sign of the

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boundaries imposed on the form of the realist novel in nineteenth-century Britain by a climate that appeared stable and knowable.

Drought, Capital, and the Regional Novel in Australia

To Henchard and the weather-prophet, the thought of a fortnight's unseasonal rain in August seems cataclysmic, "more like living in Revelations this autumn than in England" (Hardy 187). To British colonists in most parts of Australia, however, it was drought that posed a more truly apocalyptic threat. Such events, explained the New South Wales meteorologist H. C. Russell, were of a duration, scale, and intensity simply unimaginable in Britain:

> [T]he word drought is not used here in the sense in which it is often used in England and elsewhere, that is, to signify a period of a few days or weeks, in which not a drop of rain falls, but it is used to signify a period of months or years during which little rain falls, and the country gets burnt up, grass and water disappear, crops become worthless and sheep and cattle die. (*On Periodicity* 3)

As colonists moved farther into the interior of Australia, invading new biogeographic areas in their incessant search for pastoral land, drought also presented an ontological challenge. Neither the cause nor the extent of a drought appeared to be predictable; nor was it apparent if drought should be seen as an anomalous event or an inherent part of the climate—and, if the latter, whether it was a rare phase or a more normative state. Ellery expressed the hope that "reasonable premonition of climatic vicissitudes—such as rains, droughts, excessive heat, or cold—could be deduced from the discussion of past and present meteorological observations," before frankly admitting "the apparent hopelessness of any such attempt in our present state of knowledge" (10, 11). Such scientific difficulty was underlaid by the more fundamental misconception that Australia's seasons ought to resemble those of Britain. Russell's research had sought not only to identify a periodic cycle that might explain Australia's climate—cautiously settling for a period of nineteen years, as having "an amount of probability in its favour that will justify at least a careful examination"—but also to identify the "remarkable coincidences" of data that might prove its alignment with the British weather system ("Meteorological Periodicity" 159; fig. 1). Writing of the Indigenous understanding of the climate in arid central Australia, Robert Hoogenraad and George Jampijinpa Robertson point out that the region "does not have truly cyclical seasons, though it does have several observable patterns that recur, albeit not always at predictable times or in a predictable sequence" (34). Similarly, Deborah Rose stresses that attempting to align Indigenous climate knowledge with the Western calendar risks replicating an elementary settler misprision, "map[ping] a desire for stability and predictability onto a continent characterised by extremes of variation and unpredictability, and implicitly defin[ing] as deviant any weather that fails to conform to these Eurocentric standards" (38). A profound lack of local insight therefore encompassed Thomas Alexander Browne's fateful decision, in the late 1850s, to join the tide of squatters then flowing out to the pastoral frontier of the Riverina, a "great interior system of sea-like plains" on the border between New South Wales and Victoria (Boldrewood, *Squatter's Dream* 188). This extensive bioregion is "dominated by a persistently dry semi-arid climate, and characterized by hot summers and cool winters" (Sahukar et al. 91; fig. 2).

Browne initially purchased the Murrabit sheep station and its 16,000 sheep, but by early 1863 he owed some £40,000 to his creditors and avoided bankruptcy only by surrendering the property. Despite his being financially ruined, family support allowed him in September 1864 to take over another sheep station, the 12,800-acre Bundidjaree, which was flourishing after an unusually wet season. This area had been the home of the Narrungdera clan of the Wiradjuri people, until the culmination of conflict with invading settlers in 1841, when "posses of settlers on both sides of the river trapped 60 or 70 Wiradjuri men, women and children . . . and shot them down": the place of the massacre is still named on maps as Murdering Island (Gammage 35).

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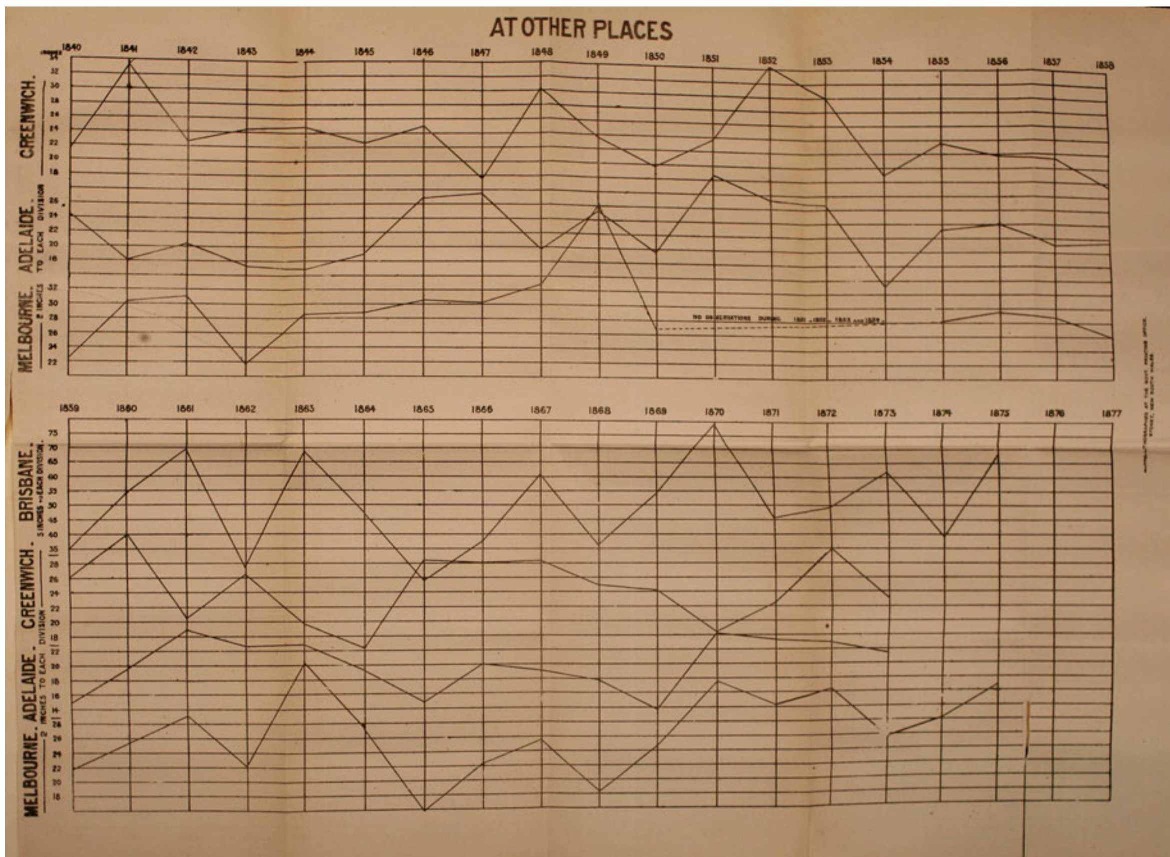

Fig. 1. Diagram of possible correlations between rainfall in Greenwich (England) and the Australian colonies. H. C. Russell, "Meteorological Periodicity," *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 10, 1876, p. 177. *Biodiversity Heritage Library*, www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/36338584#page/241/mode/1up.

Browne's proprietorship of Bundidjaree coincided almost exactly with the beginning of a significant ENSO event that would affect much of the continent. A first period of drought ("very strongly felt in Australia") lasted from mid-1864 until late 1866, and a second period ("very strong") took hold from late 1867 until sometime in 1869 (Garden 7). As W. H. L. Ranken recounted soon after, in *The Dominion of Australia: An Account of Its Foundations* (1874),

> [t]he water in the shallow lakes dried, sheets of water 30 and 40 miles in circumference vanished, wells gave in, the grass altogether disappeared, and stock began to die. . . . [O]f all the sheep taken out to this country north of Adelaide, the greater portion perished within four years of their departure; some upon their runs, but most in the attempt to return. . . . [M]ost of the sheep stations formed out there after the exploration of '60–'62 have been abandoned. (69–70)

"By 1869," Browne's biographer observes, "he was finished and Bundidjaree passed into the hands of the Bank of New South Wales. How much money Browne lost (and whose it was) was never spelt out" (de Serville). Browne based his first novel on these painful experiences: written under the nom de plume of Rolf Boldrewood, *The Squatter's Dream* was serialized in the Sydney-based *Town and Country Journal* in 1875 and then published in London in a revised edition as *Ups and Downs* in 1878. After Boldrewood struck commercial success a decade later with *Robbery under Arms* (1889), a tale of outlaw "bushrangers" that sold over 500,000

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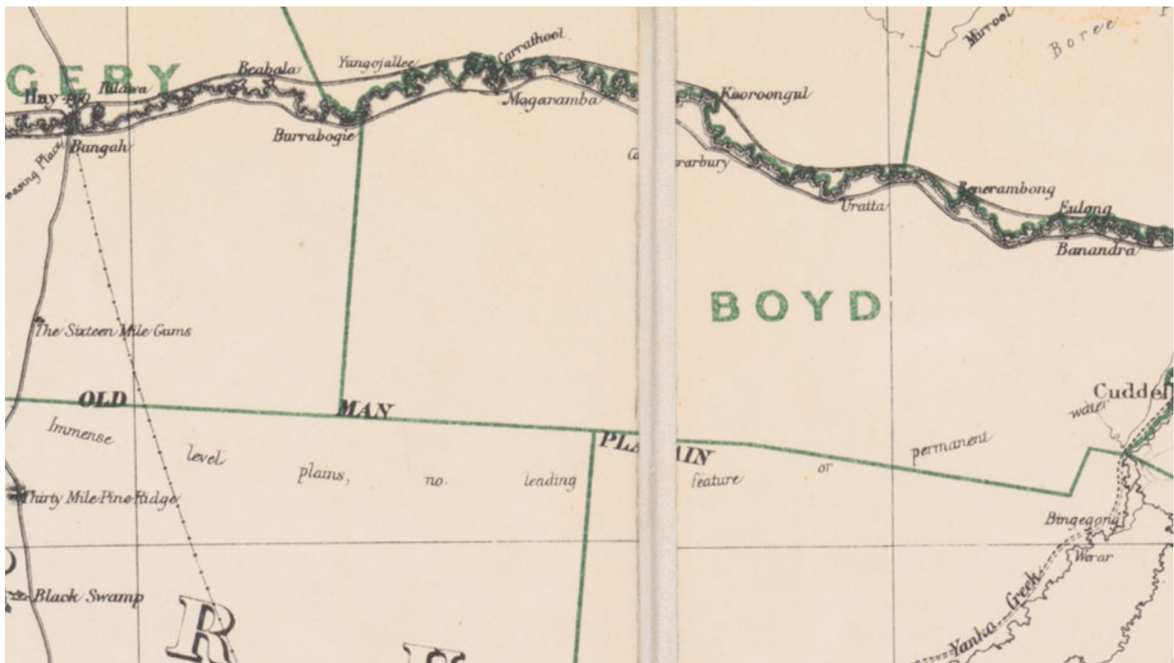

Fig. 2. Detail of map of the colony of New South Wales describing the Riverina as "Immense level plains, no leading feature or permanent water." New South Wales Surveyor General. *New South Wales*. Surveyor General's Office, [1875?]. *National Library of Australia*, MAP RM 4437, nla.gov.au/nla.obj-232476762.

copies when it was included in the Macmillan Colonial Library, his first novel was reissued in the same series as *The Squatter's Dream: A Story of Australian Life* (1890).

Writing less than half a century after the first novel was published in Australia, and depicting a new pastoral frontier, Boldrewood was not working within any clearly demarcated local tradition of colonial regional literature.[6] Indeed, critics now point to his role in establishing a dominant strain of regional representation that "begins with non-Indigenous settlement . . . and is predominantly masculinist . . . in its framing metaphors of battle and endurance" (Magner and Potter 4). Boldrewood's attempts to depict the specificities of place from a settler perspective drew instead on British models from earlier in the century, his biographer noting the particular influence of Walter Scott (Boldrewood's "admiration" of Scott "was unstinted"), as well as Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859), a saga of Australian pastoral expansion (de Serville). Kingsley's novel had been welcomed in Australia as one of the first celebratory British fictions of settlement, and it shares with Scott an interest in what he described, in "An Essay on Romance" (1824), as settings and events outside "the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society" (129). In adapting such models to the context of the Riverina, Boldrewood's regionalism combined a mixture of traits associated with realism and romance: beliefs in a regular and annual seasonal cycle and in developmental progress; type-based character portrayals that dwell on idealized upper-class settlers but also extend to racialized stereotypes of the Indigenous population; an attempt at the realistic representation of speech, geographic setting, and historical events; and an underlying commitment to plot-driven, episodic narrative that allows the climate to be figured in antagonistic terms. Simon Gikandi's comments on the significance of form in colonial space, although discussing the very different context of writers in twentieth-century Africa, help explain Boldrewood's heterogeneous approach: rather than "separate categories,"

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Gikandi observes, romance and realism are "different ways" for the colonial writer to think "about time, place, and identity and thus [are] the conjunctive sides of the same mimetic project" (311–12). Boldrewood's early Australian regionalism demonstrates a "worlding" of realism emerging out of the disjunction between a familiar type of British subject and the unfamiliar and unpredictable climate that they are now immersed in.

The protagonist of *The Squatter's Dream* is the young proprietor of a successful coastal cattle farm whose climate knowledge was shaped by his upbringing in the West Country of England, near Hardy's Wessex. Jack Redgrave's "rooted dislike to steady thinking" and "general heedlessness of the morrow" drive him to seek escape from the humdrum limits of established settler society (5)—though not by immersion in a premodern culture, as might be expected of the "Fenimore Cooper of the aboriginals and pioneers of this vast South Land," as Boldrewood was dubbed by one Australian reviewer, but by pursuing the spectacular financial gains promised by frontier pastoralism (Review). Recapitulating Boldrewood's own experience, Redgrave abandons his existing cattle station—"this realized order, this capitalized comfort"—and sets out for the "terra incognita of Riverina," where he purchases the Gondaree cattle station (11, 39). The property is lush and its herds are thriving, and with the aid of Sandy M'Nab, an indefatigable Scottish station overseer in the mold of Donald Farfrae, Redgrave converts it from cattle to sheep and sets about an ambitious program of investment and modernization. Most of the novel is devoted to the five years that Redgrave spends at Gondaree, and his experience there of weather patterns that seem almost willfully recalcitrant—most notably drought, but also the "unseasonable immersion" of a major flood (144)—and that repeatedly raise and then dash his hopes of financial success. At a structural level, *The Squatter's Dream* stages a disjunction between familiar and unknown climate regimes: although a conception of annual seasonal cycles persists in Redgrave's yearly journeys to Melbourne to sell his wool clip and consult with his bankers, these actions become increasingly misaligned with the multiyear drought that begins to take hold.

In contrast to the regular seasonal changes that animate the regional novel in Britain, the elongated timescale of drought in Australia stalls any straightforward sense of narrative progress. A later novel of the Riverina, Joseph Furphy's *Such Is Life* (1897), which is also set in the midst of a prolonged drought, presents a sprawling series of picaresque encounters through irregular and digressive diary entries. Its narrator describes the "thread of narrative being thus purposely broken" in order to avoid the "impossible task of investing . . . a generally hap-hazard economy with poetical justice" (52). Images of this "hap-hazard economy" include the sight of agricultural laborers, "dreading a rainless winter," attempting to pump water from a swamp, only for it to be "scattered, fine as dust, through the thirsty atmosphere" by a strong wind (265); and the recollection of a stock route "strewn with carcasses of travelling sheep" for hundreds of miles (165).[7] Whereas Furphy's narrator is something of a frontier philosopher, however, the protagonist of *The Squatter's Dream* is a greenhorn whose naivete is most evident in his misguided climate expectations. Advised early on not to "be building too much on the saysons in these parts," he experiences a moment of anxious self-doubt that highlights the vast imaginative labor that might be required to come to terms with this region: "Was such a change in the seasons credible, and could all his stretch of luxuriant prairie turn into dust and ashes? It was impossible. He had known bad seasons, or thought he had, in the old west country; . . . but as to any total disappearance of pasture, any ruinous loss of stock, such he had never witnessed and was quite unable to realize" (45). Simon Ryan has described the role in Australia of aesthetic strategies such as the picturesque as "mechanism[s] for deferral," offering a means of containing the landscape's "threatening vastness and unfamiliarity" (60). In a similar fashion, Redgrave's moment of anxious foreshadowing indicates the incommensurability of inherited British forms and modes of perception with this new climate reality. Returning to his property at the start of the third year of his tenancy to find "[e]verything very dry," the shocked Redgrave reflects, "I must keep quiet till the vision

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accommodates itself to the landscape" (Boldrewood 89). Ultimately, trapped in this "hopeless season," he learns "by sad experience to distrust . . . all . . . ordinary phenomena" (212). The irregular progression of the seasons disrupts the intertwined developmental narratives of individual growth, investment, and colonial expansion that might be expected to underpin such a settler narrative. Moreover, it carries an implicit threat of racial degeneration, given that colonial writers commonly ascribe negative Indigenous stereotypes to the effect of the climate: "The driest and the wettest season cannot be foretold; . . . they cannot be anticipated, so the people are careless, listless, and hopeless in calamity" (Ranken 50). Without familiar seasonal changes, Redgrave's character development also remains in stasis and the plot grinds to a halt, as he is forced to simply wait and hope that conditions improve. In the culminating "famine year," the entirety of which is compressed into only a few pages, Redgrave recognizes that the "tranced and death-like earth" has not only brought about his financial ruin but also laid waste to the Victorian ideals of "discretion, purpose, energy, what not" that were meant to ensure his success (Boldrewood 189, 190, 192). Bankrupt and despondent after five years—and almost two hundred pages—he has not only failed to progress but found himself worse off than when he began.

The sense of climate uncertainty in *The Squatter's Dream* is further intensified through the contrast—simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed—with Indigenous climate knowledge. Redgrave's interactions with a young female Indigenous stockrider, Wildduck, provide an example of what Robert Dixon terms a "shadow cartography of prior Indigenous occupation" (21). When Redgrave is first considering his Riverina purchase, Wildduck offers a brief but pointed reminder of its extensive prior occupancy and how an alternative use of its natural resources had previously sustained human life for untold centuries:

> "Me think 'um you better git it back to me and old man Jack," suggested Wildduck. . . . "Ole man Jack owns Gondaree water-hole by rights. Everybody say Gondaree people live like black fellows. What for you not give it us back again?"
>
> "Well, I'm blowed," answered the overseer, aghast at the audacious proposition; "what next? No, no, Wildduck. We've improved the country." (32)

A stronger feeling of settler unease is aroused by a visit to Murdering Lake—a fictional place whose name echoes that of the region's real Murdering Island—the deserted scene of a "little fighting" involving Mark Stangrove, one of the area's long-established squatters and brother of Redgrave's future wife, Maud (109). "It must be a terrible thing in a deed like this," Maud comments, "not to be *quite* certain whether one was in the right or not" (115). More fleetingly, the novel also hints at what might be called an Indigenous "shadow climatology." When Redgrave first visits the property he will ultimately buy, he is taken to see the remnants of an elaborate system of weirs, "showing considerable ingenuity," built for the purpose of harvesting fish and eels "after a flood of unusual height" (34).[8] Much later, and on the cusp of financial ruin, Redgrave will comment, "We are living in strange times. . . . [I]t is a pity we can't get a few hints from the blacks, who must have seen all the dry seasons since Captain Cook" (211). The ethnometeorologists Rhys Jones and Betty Meehan point out that Indigenous climate knowledge in Australia was a form not of forecast but of "'backcast,' . . . a deep knowledge of what had happened in the past, and what the solutions were then" (18). The possibility of drawing on such a "backcast" is not taken up in the novel—indeed it is inconceivable that it could be treated as a serious proposition, given that Redgrave can only imagine Indigenous history beginning with colonial contact. His idle musing nevertheless underscores the paucity of relevant folk climate knowledge among the settler population, and the need to find a frame of reference other than the British seasonal model.

The most complex climate insights offered by *The Squatter's Dream* emerge out of its interest in linking the intersection of these unpredictable weather patterns to the imperial financial system through their combined impact on its hapless protagonist. Chakrabarty points out that climate change has "conjoined" the histories of the earth system and

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capitalism, and he emphasizes the conceptual and political challenges posed by the consequent need to "think about different scales simultaneously" (3). Boldrewood's "story of Australian life" illustrates one important element of those conjoined histories—namely, the financial system's impact on the manner in which the climate is understood and experienced. Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver describe the novel as concerned with "the life cycle of a squatter, seen almost exclusively in terms of economic drives and imperatives that are both national and global" (48). More than this, Redgrave's annual visits to his banker foreground the central role of finance in enabling colonial agriculture to be sustained in relative isolation from local climate considerations. When Redgrave loses much of his flock in disastrous floods early in his tenure, the strong price of wool overrides the need for any sustained consideration of the risk posed by the climate: the banker "listened with polite sympathy . . . but observed that such accidents must occasionally happen in wet seasons, and that, as he was informed, the country generally had received immense benefit from the late rains" (Boldrewood 145). The climate might be expected to be at the forefront of the bank's concern when, a few years later, it forecloses on Redgrave's mortgage at the height of the drought. Yet even now this action is prompted by other factors: a "tremendous commercial panic in England," coinciding with a "sudden and serious fall" in the price of livestock (176, 179). The bank's determination to proceed in accordance with the "logic of banking"—"inexorable" laws that had "stood the test of years, of generations" but were formed in a different climatic context—may now spell ruin for the drought-stricken Redgrave, but it was by virtue of the same "unvarying" principles that he was originally able to make his hazardous investment in the arid Riverina (197). The novel thus suggests that the structures of colonial finance may be impervious to the challenges posed by this unfamiliar climate, even if individual colonial subjects are not. After all, Boldrewood refuses to imagine his protagonist overcoming the adversities that threaten him: the demands imposed by climate and capital prove too much and Redgrave is forced off his land in humiliating fashion.

Victorian Climates and the Form of an Ending

The formal challenge posed by Australia's unfamiliar climate is perhaps brought most sharply into focus by the need for narrative resolution. Furphy's *Such Is Life* simply peters out: "Such is life, my fellow-mummers," it concludes, "signifying—nothing" (297). By contrast, with drought seemingly depleting the resources of realism along with the region's water supply, Boldrewood launches his ruined settler protagonist into an unabashedly fantastical quest romance, as he journeys into the unexplored hinterland to seek "fortune by a triumphant shortcut—a new run with limitless plains and hidden lakes, a copper mine, a gold mine, a silver mine, a navigable river" (232). Thus, *The Squatter's Dream* now reiterates as explicit wish fulfillment the same plot of territorial expansion and natural exploitation that has previously been desiccated by the climate. In the pages that follow, Redgrave and two traveling companions—motivated by the "insatiable greed of their kind" (246)—soon discover just such a prize: a vast area of suitable land with abundant sources of permanent water, "perfect in quality, and more than sufficient in quantity," although with the dual inconveniences of isolation and a sizable Indigenous population (257). As the narrative nears its end, however, it bifurcates in remarkable fashion. The revised version found in the published novel describes how Redgrave is first cheated out of claiming the new land by a speculator but eventually secures its title and stocks it with sheep. The subsequent restoration of his fortunes, occurring over several years by way of "strict economy and careful management," is recounted listlessly and with minimal detail—the goal is simply to make enough money to secure the hand of his betrothed and restore his pre-Riverina life (304). In the original serial publication, however, events take a very different turn: after failing to gain title to the new land, Redgrave turns to alcohol and begins a series of "aimless, hopeless wanderings, from one station to another, changing his occupation at will," until he is reduced "to the condition of the hopeless paralytic —a wreck and a warning" (*Squatter's Dream* [6 Nov. 1875] 743; [13 Nov. 1875] 783). Eventually making his way back to his original cattle station on the

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coast, Redgrave meets with a hostile reception, and his misery is compounded when his faithful dog dies in his arms. It is at this nadir that Redgrave realizes that the entire Riverina experience has been a literal nightmare—he wakes up from the "squatter's dream" of the original title. The goal of both sets of narrative contortions, in other words, is merely to bring Redgrave back to where he started. In these multiple and blatantly artificial resolutions, *The Squatter's Dream* underlines the difficulty of aligning British narrative conventions of closure with a climate that experiences "no seasons of a year, but years of a season" (Ranken 30).

"Elizabeth-Jane found herself in a latitude of calm weather," concludes the peaceful final page of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (Hardy 322). In Australia, by contrast, Boldrewood finds such conditions to be the "sole terror" of the climate: the "slow, unnatural, gradual desiccation" of a dry winter followed by a dry summer, which "eats up every green herb, and . . . metamorphoses plain and forest and watercourse into similitudes of the 'valley of dry bones'" (188). On the one hand, reading novels such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* in the light of Boldrewood helps bring to the fore what might be called the climate unconscious of nineteenth-century British literature, revealing the predictable seasonality of the regional novel to be structurally significant as well as an element of local color. On the other hand, reading novels such as *The Squatter's Dream* in the light of Hardy suggests that colonial Victorian literature offers an anticipation of Ghosh's claim that "[t]he Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins [of empire] are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us" (62–63). This is not, however, to suggest a political or ethical equivalence between white settlers in the nineteenth century and the vulnerable populations of present-day Asia that Ghosh has in mind. Indeed, Boldrewood's determined focus on the emotional travails of his white settler protagonist makes it easy to overlook the survival of the novel's Indigenous remnant. The end of Redgrave's tenure in the Riverina is paralleled by the highly sentimentalized death of Wildduck, yet of her bereaved family the narrator merely observes, "For two days they watched their dead—soundless, sleepless, foodless. Ere the third day broke, the mourners and their charge had disappeared" (226). In this disappearance, the novel offers an unintentional parable of an Anthropocene criticism that focuses too closely on white vulnerability. If there are anticipatory glimpses of our own moment to be found in Victorian literature, however, some can be seen in narratives of Australia's pastoral colonization, which bear the formal traces of an environment that is increasingly overwritten by capitalism, and a climate that seems suddenly and alarmingly unknowable.

Notes

1. See, e.g., recent special issues in *Victorian Studies* (Miller, *Climate Change*) and *Victorian Literature and Culture* (Griffiths and Kreisel), and collections edited by Menely and Taylor and by Hensley and Steer.

2. For a survey of the "cultural, moral, and aesthetic value" ascribed in literature to the European annual seasonal cycle, see Somervell 52.

3. All quotations from *The Squatter's Dream* are from the 1890 novel, unless otherwise noted.

4. See also Hunter; Keith. Duncan notes the "still-useful classical distinction between georgic and pastoral modes of writing" in relation to these novels (323).

5. The storm was named for the sailing ship *Royal Charter*, bound from Melbourne to Liverpool; when it sank, over four hundred lives and some £500,000 in bullion from the Australian gold fields were lost (Booth 550).

6. For a survey of the late-twentieth-century emergence of cultures of regional writing in Australia, see Mead.

7. The political and environmental contexts of Furphy's novel are discussed by Lever.

8. Such fish traps were present on river systems throughout the region. The Ngunnhu fish traps at Brewarrina, on the Barwon River in New South Wales, may be the oldest human construction in the world ("Brewarrina").

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Abstract: Anthropocene criticism of Victorian literature has focused more on questions of temporality and predictability than on those related to climate in the nineteenth century. Climate knowledge is central to the regional novel, which is attuned to the seasonal basis of agriculture and sociality, but the formal influence of the British climate also becomes more apparent through a consideration of the genre's adaptation to colonial conditions. Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* highlights how a known seasonal cycle underpins the differentiation of climate and weather and explores the role of economic systems in mediating the experience of climate. Rolf Boldrewood's *The Squatter's Dream*, set amid the nonannual seasonal change of Australia, demonstrates the fracturing of the regional novel form under the stress of sustained drought. Such a comparative approach highlights the importance of regular seasonality as the basis of the Victorian novel's ability to conceptualize the relation of climate, weather, and capital.

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