
The author of The Reef: A Passionate History (subtitled “The Greater Barrier Reef from Captain Cook to Climate Change”), Iain McCalman, is an environmental historian, a discipline with close affinities to my own – that of geography. As a sub-field of history, environmental history is a scant forty years old, beginning with William Cronon’s path-breaking Changes in the Land (1983) and Alfred Crosby’s Ecological Imperialism (1986), though there were antecedents like Edward Hyam’s Soil and Civilization (1952) and even earlier works.

In contrast with mainstream history, which largely treats mainstream history as irrelevant to the ebb and flow of human activity, environmental history looks at the impact of human societies on the natural surround and how those impacts rebound on society. Central to social treatment of nature is human perception – whether ecosystems are seen as hostile and forbidding, as sacred and familial, or as merely to be exploited in an instrumental fashion. McCalman’s book captures all three attitudes in the evolution of views of the Great Barrier Reef.

Fourteen hundred miles along the eastern coast of Australia, the Reef has been touted as one of the great natural wonders of the world, but currently faces numerous challenges at the hands of climate change, species infestations, and aggressive tourism and industrial activity.

The genius of this book is that it tells the story of the human-Reef encounter, not in a conventional narrative, though it does proceed in a roughly chronological order. Rather, it focuses on individuals – explorers, scientists, and conservationists – who assisted in the definition and understanding of the Reef over time, and how different perceptions at different times have shaped its treatment. McCalman also links this evolving view of the Reef to changing views of Australia’s aboriginal people, and what the latter’s views and use of the environment (including the Reef) was and is, and how these have slowly begun to gain more respect amongst people of European ancestry.

The personalities and worldviews of the individuals examined vary greatly, and McCalman does his best to give us insight into their states of mind – a useful, but tricky, business when these individuals are no longer alive, and one must rely on clues and inferences from primarily literature such as journals, letters, contemporary accounts and, in some cases, books and articles by the individuals themselves.
The first chapters profile British explorers, Captain Cook and Matthew Flinders, both of whom had naturalists on board, thus helping to provide amongst the first European descriptions of the Reef. For Cook, navigating the Reef proved to be a nightmare and nearly lost him his ship on more than one occasion. As the author notes “[Cook had] read the travel account of Samuel Purchas... which described deep sea coral ‘ledges’ and he’d recently sighted a variety of reef forms in the South sea Islands, but it was only much later, on his second voyage, that he explicitly echoed the opinion of his onboard naturalists... that coral ‘rockes’ are formed in the sea by animals.” One Frenchman had even put forth the theory that corals – described as flowers by some – were in reality insects that could create bone.

It was Cook and his men who first initiated violence against the Aboriginal people when appropriated sea turtles at a time when tradition forebade their harvesting, but eventually the two sides came together again in amity. Despite these initial hostilities, Cook had a grudging respect for the Aboriginals:

...in reality they are far more happy than we Europeans: being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniencies so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquility which is not disturb’d by the Inequality of Condition: the Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them all things necessary for life.... In short they seem seem’d to set no value on any thing we gave them, nor would they ever part with any thing of their own for any one article we could offer them; this in my opinion argues that they think of themselves provided with all the necessaries of Life and... have no superfluities.” (qtd. on pp. 25-26).

Approximately thirty years after Cook – in 1802 – Flinders was commanded to circumnavigate the continent that he would dub ‘Terra Australis’. Flinders benefitted from having an Aboriginal man on board – whose name is variously spelled Bongoree or Bungaree – who was able to decrease tensions in numerous encounters with Aboriginal warriors. In contrast with Cook’s at best tolerant attitude, Flinders had a high opinion of the Aboriginal people he encountered, “[o]f their dispositions we had every reason to speak highly” (qtd. on p. 40), and he was genuinely fond of his Aboriginal shipmate. Flinders was also the first to offer more detailed and exquisite descriptions of the Reef.

Other individuals and groups profiled in the book include Eliza Frazer, a woman who, along with her husband, was captured and allegedly brutalized by her Aboriginal captors and whose story was made in a salacious tell-all saga by a prominent Fleet Street yellow journalist. Her story, later revealed to be largely an exaggeration, where not outright fiction, helped create a strong climate of opinion against Aboriginals, who were generally viewed by whites as cannibals and headhunters of the lowest human
development. Joseph Jukes, a British naturalist who offered pioneering theories about the reef, is also examined, as are three Europeans rescued by Aboriginal people, who lived amongst them for a considerable period of time, and eventually returned to ‘civilization.’

Another chapter focuses on an English brother and sister, who escaped an abusive family under rather different circumstances and settled in Australia. The brother, William Saville-Kent, became one of the first systematic students of the Reef and produced a landmark volume, *The Great Barrier Reef of Australia: Its Products and Potentialities* (1893), which took Britain and Australia by storm. Then there were the Banfields – Ted and Bertha – who created their own Walden Pond on Dunk Island in the Reef, while trying to avoid dependence on outside jobs, though Ted was forced to write for newspapers from time to time.

Alex Aggasiz, the son of famed biologist Louis Aggsiz, whose name had been besmirched, somewhat justifiably, by the famous neo-Darwinian Sir Thomas Huxley, set out to prove that Darwin’s theory of reef development was wrong. In the long run he was unsuccessful, but his work nonetheless advanced the cause of scientific discourse. Then there was Maurice Yonge and his group of Cambridge researchers who conducted the first multi-disciplinary study of the Reef in the 1920s and whose findings were published between 1930 and 1968.

After this, the narrative shifts to the campaign of a tiny environmental group, the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, whose principal leaders – poet Judith Wright, Len Webb (forestry scientist), and artist John Busst set about to protect the Reef from impending industrial depredations and who achieved significant success in forcing the national government to assume control over the Reef and the establishment of a national marine park in the 1970s. In 1981, the Reef became a World Heritage Site through UNESCO.

The final chapter and Epilogue are devoted to the career of accidental reef scientist, Charlie Veron, still living, who was largely self-taught and who changed the way the world scientific community viewed reefs and coral speciation. One of his most recent publications is *A Reef in Time: The Great Barrier Reef from Beginning to End*. Towards the latter part of his life he has become a fierce defender of the Reef and a prophet of its imminent demise at the hands of climate change and other ills. The author concludes by comparing the symbiosis of the algae and the coral that make reefs viable to the need for a union of head and heart, as embodied in Charlie Veron – an emblem of what we humans need to save the planet at this hour.
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