

Colonial History, Economy and Culture

The Influence of South-Eastern Australian Weather and Climate

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Climate and weather are crucial elements in any natural environment, and do much to shape the human societies that exist within those environments – their history, economy and culture. Extreme short-term single events as well as elongated periods of beyond-average conditions have particular impacts. In order to understand these events and periods it is necessary to try to evaluate them against what is 'normal', natural variability or genuine extremity in a climate. A challenge in Australia has been the undeveloped recording of climate data in the nineteenth century, compounded by limited scientific understanding until recent decades of the dynamic forces that shape climate and weather. Post WWII advances in climatology, complemented by a great deal of Australian climatological and historical research, have now led to a better understanding of both the nature of the long-term climate of south-eastern Australia and the identification of weather patterns, including periods of relatively extreme weather. In this paper I will outline some of what we now understand about the Australian climate and weather in the nineteenth century, and examine two adjacent and relatively extreme long periods. These are the El-Nino-influenced years from 1864-69 that resulted in severe droughts in parts of south-eastern Australia, and the following unusually wet period from 1870-75. Both impacted upon colonial economies, especially rural industries, while the descriptive and cultural responses provide an insight into how the colonists understood and responded to the unfolding climatic conditions.

Bio

Associate Professor **Don Garden** taught History and Environmental History for many years at the University of Melbourne, where he is currently an Honorary Fellow. He is President of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, President of the Federation of Australian Historical Societies and a member of the Australian Heritage Council. His monograph publications include *Australia New Zealand and the Pacific: an environmental history* and *Droughts, Floods and Cyclones: El Ninos that shaped our colonial past*.