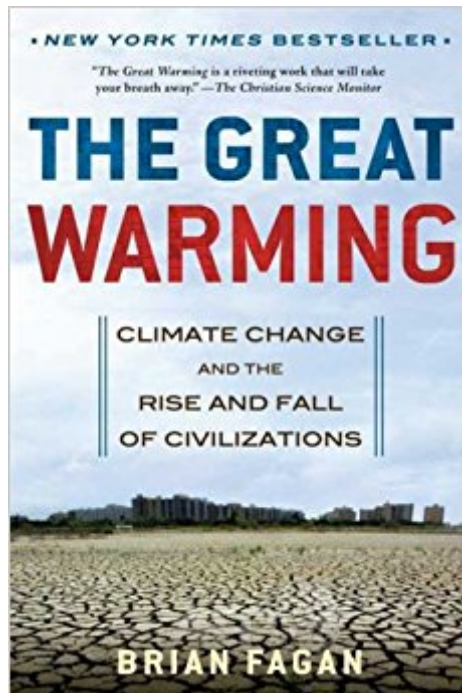


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The Great Warming: Climate Change And The Rise And Fall Of Civilizations



Synopsis

From the 10th to 15th centuries the earth experienced a rise in surface temperature that changed climate worldwide—a preview of today's global warming. In some areas, including much of Western Europe, longer summers brought bountiful crops and population growth that led to cultural flowering. In others, drought shook long-established societies, such as the Maya and the Indians of the American Southwest, whose monumental buildings were left deserted as elaborate social structures collapsed. Brian Fagan examines how subtle changes in the environment had far-reaching effects on human life, in a narrative that sweeps from the Arctic ice cap to the Sahara to the Indian Ocean. The lessons of history suggest we may be yet be underestimating the power of climate change to disrupt our lives today.

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Customer Reviews

Global warming is hardly new; in fact, the very long-term trend began about 12,000 years ago with the end of the Ice Age. Anthropologist Fagan (*The Little Ice Age*) focuses on the medieval warming period (ca. 800-1300), which helped Europe produce larger harvests; the surpluses helped fund the great cathedrals. But in many other parts of the world, says Fagan, changing water and air currents led to drought and malnutrition, for instance among the Native Americans of Northern California, whose key acorn harvests largely failed. Long-term drought contributed to the collapse of the Mayan civilization, and fluctuations in temperature contributed to, and inhibited, Mongol incursions into Europe. Fagan reveals how new research methods like ice borings, satellite observations and computer modeling have sharpened our understanding of meteorological trends in prehistorical

times and preliterate cultures. Finally, he notes how times of intense, sustained global warming can have particularly dire consequences; for example, by 2025, an estimated 2.8 billion of us will live in areas with increasingly scarce water resources. Looking backward, Fagan presents a well-documented warning to those who choose to look forward. Illus., maps. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

• Fagan is a great guide. His canvas may be smaller than Jared Diamond's *Collapse*, but Fagan's eye for detail and narrative skills are better. • *New Scientist* [A] fascinating account of shifting climatic conditions and their consequences. • *New York Times* The Great Warming is a thought-provoking read, which marshals a remarkable range of learning. • *Financial Times* The Great Warming is a riveting work that will take your breath away and leave you scrambling for a cool drink of water. The latter is a luxury to enjoy in the present, Fagan notes, because it may be in very short supply in the future. • *Christian Science Monitor* Brian Fagan offers a unique contribution to this discussion [of climate change]...Readers should not underestimate this book, writing it off as another addition to a burgeoning genre: the travel guide to a torrid world. Fagan's project is much bigger. He re-creates past societies in a lively and engaging manner, aided by his expert synthesis of obscure climatological data...In his ability to bring nature into our global, historical narratives, Fagan rivals Alfred Crosby, William H. McNeill, and Jared Diamond, scholars who revealed to large audiences the explanatory power of microscopic biota or gross geography. Fagan promises to do the same for longterm climate dynamics...We would be fools to ignore his warnings. • *American Scholar* This is not only World History at its best, sweeping across all of humankind with a coherent vision, but also a feat of imagination and massive research. If Fagan has given the medieval period throughout the globe a new dimension, he has at the same time issued an irrefutable warning about climate change that is deeply troubling. • Theodore Rabb, author of *The Last Days of the Renaissance* Climate has been making history for a very long time, though historians have rarely paid much attention to it. But as it turns out, a few less inches of rain, a change in temperature of just a degree or two can make all the difference in how human events unfold. The Great Warming demonstrates that although human beings make history, they very definitely do not make it under circumstances of their own choosing. • Ted Steinberg, author of *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History and American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn* Anthropology and archaeology have demonstrated that human responses to changes in climate, no matter how severe, are always

conditioned by culture and mediated by a society's institutions and technologies. Anthropologists and archaeologists are fortunate to have in Brian Fagan a gifted and committed intellectual ambassador who can convincingly articulate this critical point to a broader audience. •

• Environment and Society • In his ability to bring nature into our global, historical narratives, Fagan rivals Alfred Crosby, William H. McNeill, and Jared Diamond, scholars who revealed to large audiences the explanatory power of microscopic biota or gross geography. Fagan promises to do the same for long-term climate dynamics. He proves that the regional volatility associated with climate change • | shaped societies. • • The American Scholar

Of the many causes that have resulted in the collapse of most ancient cultures and civilizations, Brian Fagan in *THE GREAT WARMING* points a finger of blame at the fickleness of climate. It is quite true, he adds, that these prior cultures ended because of military conquest, disease, famine, and the like, but the driving force behind all of them was climate change. It has been only in the last few decades that climatologists like Fagan have had access to modern means to ascertain why past civilizations went under. Thanks to radio carbon dating, ice core sampling, and silt analysis, he has been able to draw a reasonably accurate map of world weather stretching back many thousands of years. His conclusions are many. First, climate change is a still imperfectly understood mixture of wind patterns, ice flow growth, volcanic eruptions, galloping desertification, and human intervention. Second, over the last few thousand years, the major culprit has been drought caused mostly by inadequate rain. We have not experienced any serious general global cooling for a dozen millennia. Third, human beings are capable of the most amazing blends of sheer lunacy with regard to self-destructive tampering with nature combined with an almost infinite capacity to adjust to the short term rhythms of a volatile climate. Fagan cites numerous cultures as examples of those that thrived for centuries--like the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Pueblo--but then in a seeming geological blink of an eye collapsed, mostly due to prolonged drought. Along the way, Fagan notes what seems to be a consistent pattern of human beings that cuts across all cultures and ages. When a culture just gets going, it tends to do so when it encounters favorable conditions for growth. There is ample rain, ample vegetation, and ample space to grow crops. The population grows quickly--too quickly. It reaches a tipping point when the previous subsistence level of water and food are now no longer adequate to feed this burgeoning population. Sometimes if the drought is severe and lengthy, the civil authorities do not have time to adjust and their civilization goes under. Other times, when the drought is less severe and less lengthy, these authorities possess enough acumen and foresight to prepare even haltingly a way to preserve water and hoard food stuffs to wait out the drought. Fagan

notes that even under the best of circumstance, human beings have showed only a limited capacity to withstand a fickle nature. The lessons that he draws for humanity in the twentieth century are cause for the deepest of concern. The potential for catastrophic famine and culture collapse is higher now than in the past if for no other reason than the same conditions which destroyed populations of much fewer numbers than today are still here, only our populations are much higher than those of the past. He is not optimistic that humanity in this century can avoid the same unhappy fates of our ancestors. The best that he can hope for is for all cultures today to look to the past so that we can view ourselves as partners with the earth rather than its master.

This book takes the reader on a world-wide look at the impact of a prolonged warming period 1000 years ago and the severe stressors that different areas and civilizations endured during a 300 to 500 year period of significant climate changes. Dr. Fagan has identified prolonged droughts as one of the most severe threats that will be faced by societies both rich and poor. These issues, which include severe famines and epidemics, will lead to population losses in large areas of the world. People who are concerned about global warming and climate change should read this book to gain a broader understanding of all the problems to be faced as a result of climatic shifts that we have only a limited ability to adapt to or to mitigate. I consider this book a necessary reference on these issues.

My rating went up one star after reading Mr. Fagan's concise summation where he easily and simply ties the ages of his study together. I had originally bought this book to try to grasp a tiny fraction of climatology in the past. The book does so much more. By no means a simple read, but very comprehensive and well developed.

The Medieval Warming Period resulted in significant developments for farming yields, which resulted in the development of governmental sophistication (taxation), theology and religion, and farming technology, which allowed for keeping of seeds and more reliable planting through the use of beast-drawn plows. The book makes more than slight inferences that none of this would be possible without the Medieval Warming Period, while downplaying the other factors that allowed European culture to develop and prosper globally. The Great Warming is a fantastic combination between history and science, providing an excellent background for elementary climatologists and readers wanting to further understand how global climate can affect daily life and food sources. While the Medieval Warming Period was beneficial for the European agricultural model, in many

other areas of the globe, drought, famine, and failed crop yields resulted in migratory populations. While western history will downplay these impacts because they were mostly on indigent and native populations, it is important to note that the Aztecs, Mayans, and many other North American native populations were greatly impacted (or even eliminated) due to droughts that lasted decades or centuries. Critiquing this book is fairly easy. The drawings and maps are absolutely horrible. It's almost like a post-writing editor threw darts at a wall to decide where to put the maps and drawings rather than the author, because they are literally placed in the middle of paragraphs or thoughts without any (or very little) relevance to the current discussion. The biggest point of critique must be the glaring lack of alternative methods theory. The author gave little or no credit to other developments in society for improvements in the quality of life. In other words, the author credits the improvement in living standards almost entirely on the climate change, while ignoring all the other modern European factors. The church, technology, and government were all developing at the same time, which may or may not have led to these quality of life improvements for the average citizen. The author downplays these other factors and enhances the atmospheric and climate changes to make his point. While this approach is perfectly acceptable in an editorial piece, this book is passed off as "science", which requires an honest evaluation of all plausible theories. The author performs a great disservice to the reader by failing to address these several shortcomings. I highly recommend this book if you're into history and you want to understand how climate change affected the development of medieval society or at least hear theories on it. If you're really into climate change, this book will be an elementary review and makes inferences that may or may not be correct and require some theatrical license for complete and understanding. Overall, while the author does an exceptional job of bringing climate change and its effect upon society, the inferences leave too much to be readily acceptable and only allow for continued "climate debate" on Fox gnu's.

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