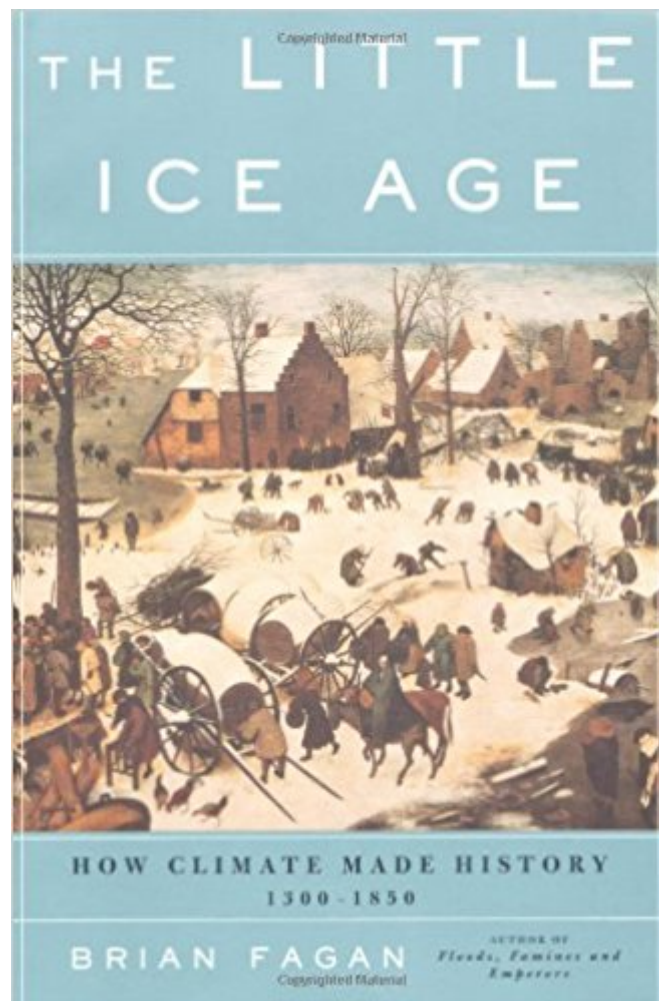




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# The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History 1300-1850



## Synopsis

The Little Ice Age tells the story of the turbulent, unpredictable, and often very cold years of modern European history, how this altered climate affected historical events, and what it means for today's global warming. Building on research that has only recently confirmed that the world endured a 500-year cold snap, renowned archaeologist Brian Fagan shows how the increasing cold influenced familiar events from Norse exploration to the settlement of North America to the Industrial Revolution. This is a fascinating book for anyone interested in history, climate, and how they interact.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Climate change is the ignored player on the historical stage," writes archeologist Brian Fagan. But it shouldn't be, not if we know what's good for us. We can't judge what future climate change will mean unless we know something about its effects in the past: "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." And Fagan's story of the last thousand years, centered on the "Little Ice Age," reminds us of what we could end up repeating: flood, fire, and famine--acts of God exacerbated by acts of man. For all that he takes a broad--a very broad--view of European history, Fagan's writing is laced with human faces, fascinating anecdotes, and a gift for the telling detail that makes history live, very much in the style of Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*. When Fagan talks about the voyages of Basque fishermen to American shores (probably landing before Columbus sailed), he puts in the taste of dried cod and the terrifying suddenness of fogs on the Grand Banks. The Great Fire of London, what it was like when the Dutch dikes broke, the Irish Potato Famine, the

year without a summer, ice fairs on the Thames, and volcanoes in the South Pacific--Fagan makes history a ripping yarn in which we are all actors, on a stage that has always been changing. --Mary Ellen Curtin --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The role of climatic change in human history remains open to question, due in large part to scant data. Fagan, professor of archeology at UC Santa Barbara, contributes substantively to the increasingly urgent debate. Contending with the dearth of accurate weather records from a few parts of the world, for little over a century Fagan (*Floods, Famines, and Emperors: El Niño and the Fate of Civilizations*) draws discerning connections between an amazing array of disparate sources: ice cores, tree rings, archeological digs, tithing records that show dates of wine harvests, cloud types depicted in portraits and landscapes over time. He details human adaptation to meteorologic events for example, the way the Dutch, in the face of rising sea levels, engineered sea walls and thus increased their farmland by a third between the late 16th and early 19th centuries.

Explanations of phenomena like the North Atlantic Oscillation (which "governs... the rain that falls on Europe") lucidly advance Fagan's conviction that, though science cannot decide if the current 150-year warming trend (with one slight interruption) is part of a normal cycle, we should err on the side of caution. His study of the potential for widespread famine further bolsters his nonpartisan argument for a serious consideration of rapid climatic shifts. But Fagan doesn't proffer a sociopolitical polemic. He notes that we lack the political will to effect change, but refrains from speculating on future environmental policy. Illus. not seen by PW. (Mar. 1) Forecast: This topical book will appeal to fans of John McPhee, as well as to science and history scholars. With publicity targeted at the coasts (author tour in L.A., San Francisco and N.Y.; a talk at N.Y.'s Museum of Natural History), a forthcoming review in *Discovery* magazine and Fagan's enthusiastic readership, it should sell well. Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I bought this book because I expected to enjoy it, but although I read the whole thing, only one chapter, on the Irish Famine, actually held my interest. The problem with the other chapters is that they are so diffuse that they end up seeming to say almost nothing. The weather, it is a'changin, is the theme, and it is supported by paragraph after paragraph of sweeping generalizations. Yes, there are small anecdotes scattered throughout to enliven the weather-reporting, but in the end, they all blur together. Picture reading a summary of the weather in the United States over the past 10 years, and you will have a very good idea of how this book reads: Some regions experienced extreme cold

and snow during the winter, while other areas in the west were dry and sunny. The springs were warmer than average, rainfall was heavy, and there were hurricanes and tornadoes in the south. Now stretch that out for page after page and see if your head does not begin to nod. The thesis of the book is that, well, we can't engage in environmental determinism, because that is an academic taboo, but we can say that the climate has changed and that history has happened, and that there seems that there might be a connection. Not very compelling, is it? \*Of course\* changes in climate \*cause\* changes in human behavior and thus in history! If the area where you can or cannot grow food changes, then that will perforce change where people live and how they live, and that's history! Was the French revolution caused by the extreme poverty of French peasants, and by the fact that their overlords seemed to have no interest in how they produced the food they all needed? Who can doubt it? And does climate affect the ability to grow food? Obviously! The one chapter that really hung together was An Ghorta Mor, about the Great Hunger in Ireland caused by the failure of the potato crop. For the first time in the whole book, the author slows down and focuses on a single region and a single period of time, rather than sweeping from decade to decade and place to place. And that works. But mostly you read things like, "Weather in northern Europe was extremely cold. The rivers in xyz froze over. New Zealand, meanwhile, was also cold, and there was famine in China." Just too broad to be of any interest to read. Some people complain about the fact that the author tacks on comments about our current Global Warming controversy (if controversy it is) and appends a chapter at the end making a somewhat half-hearted argument that yes, global warming is real, it is man-made, and it might be bad. I really don't care by the time I get to that chapter, because he has already demonstrated to my satisfaction that the climate has changed many times and we don't really know why. If a Little Ice Age brings suffering, might a warm age actually ameliorate human life in some way? Maybe. Might it spur new technologies? Probably. This is hardly a screed telling me to give up my car and ride a bike to work. All the evidence herein suggests that mainly, we don't know, the patterns are irregular and hard to interpret, and that extreme cold is no picnic for human civilizations. One other point that deserves mention is the choice to use metric measurements throughout the book. Ok, I get it, as Americans, we are the only ones who aren't very familiar with those measurements. But the intro gives false information about the relationship between kilometers and miles. And then throughout the rest of the book, I would have to mentally translate every fact: winters were 2 degrees C. colder, and the glaciers advanced 2.5 kilometers down into the valleys. Often, instead of absolute numbers, we are given comparisons, but all this just makes it hard for me to form a mental image of what it was like. New York was 2 degrees C colder than 10 years before, and there were 28 days of below-zero weather. (Is that

below zero C? If so, isn't that pretty much what winter is?) I really expected to be interested in the daily life of Europeans from 1300-1850 and how weather impacted them, but in the end, I didn't feel that I got that. Maybe it's because the facts are just so diffuse--no trend is obvious enough close-up to make much of a picture. But I think the author made many bad choices, giving us too many broad statements and not enough picturable narratives.

Mostly a series of anecdotes with little coherence. The author jumps around in time so much that it starts to make little sense. The comparisons with the twentieth century are confusing, at best. After a while I started to doubt the veracity or accuracy of many of the statements. There is a tremendous amount of padding that has little to do with The Little Ice Age itself but which the author thinks is interesting history. For one, the history of the Great Potato Famine in Ireland has less to do with weather than the potato blight and the heartless British colonial policy that makes it famous. The entire book is really about the unpredictability of the weather and could easily be read as a not so subtle critique of Global Warming despite the last chapter. After all, the entire premise of the book is that the weather is unpredictable. I was disappointed and eventually started skimming instead of reading. This is one book I would get at the library before buying.

A real page turner. I had already seen the History Channel video of the same name, based on Mr. Fagan's book. The video made me want to read the book and I'm glad I did. Highly recommend. Mr. Fagan's carefully researched work is well worth the time.

This book is written for the average reader, and is not a scholarly work. The author is a professor of archeology at UCSB. A wonderful book of facts and information on the climate during the "Little Ice Age". Scientists have collected a good deal of information on the Little Ice Age, as it is recent enough that written records were kept and are available from many parts of the world. These written records provide information about when the Thames river froze, and when crops were planted and harvested in many parts of the world. These bits of information can and have been put together to provide information on the Little Ice Age. Mankind certainly cannot blame the Little Ice Age on mankind and his emission of too much CO<sub>2</sub>, as the industrial age did not start until about 1750, which was the last part of the Little Ice Age. Would that more people would read this book and that we could have an informed discussion of the climate based on facts, and not just emotion and pseudo facts.

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