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**Brian Fagan, *Floods, Famines, and Emperors: El Nino and the Fate of Civilizations*
Basic Books, 1999**

Reviewed by Lynn Rhodes
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Brian Fagan, a well-known, prolific science writer and archaeologist, has written an insightful book bringing history, cultural survival and climate change facts together in a provocative work entitled *Floods, Famines, and Emperors: El Nino and the Fate of Civilizations*. Being in the field of environmental protection for 35 years, I found the book pertinent and thought-provoking. Although written in 1999, it is even more relevant today, in the age of the Anthropocene, where the balance of man, environment and sustainability (of both) is at risk and a matter of political debate about facts and supposition.

“Anthropocene” is a proposed term for the present geological epoch, from the time of the Industrial Revolution onwards, during which humanity has begun to have a significant impact on the environment. It is derived from anthropo- and -cene, coined by Paul Crutzen, born 1933, a Nobel-winning Dutch chemist.

I recommend this book not only for a general audience, but for scientists, environmentalists, archaeologists, planners, and developers as well as business leaders and scholars.

Fagan has attempted to appeal to both his general and scientific audience. In order to accomplish that, the writing style has a built-in tension between scientific, academic and personal story telling. More than one reviewer of this work lists this as a weakness. With the same observations of style, I found the same traits kept my interest.

Fagan shows us how the global weather patterns that result from the El Niño phenomenon reflect a long history of global weather patterns. He describes how civilizations of the past have been destroyed by such patterns when they were unable to foresee and/or adapt to changing conditions. Fagan does this in three parts.

- Part One: *The Christmas Child*, which scientifically describes the phenomenon of El Niño and what scientists know factually about it, giving the reader a working knowledge of it. Having scientific data and tools to help evaluate climate history, relating to human civilization, helps us to understand and adapt.
- Part Two: *El Niños in Antiquity*, tells a story of how past civilizations and human history have been impacted by El Niño. Of particular interest is how severe climate-change affects key aspects of society, such as how the government works and how society behaves and interacts. Fagan points out specific, limited ways in which society can respond or face collapse.

- Part Three: *Climate Change and the Stream of Time*, discusses how social and cultural behavior today may be affected as compared to the past. Cultural and societal vulnerabilities and key areas of attention are described -- such as population levels, government leadership or lack thereof, and balancing limits of finite resources.

One can see the later influence of Fagan's book on Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005). Both draw clear parallels between man and the environment; some are aspects which man may impact and some are not. Fagan's descriptions of relationships between populations, the carrying capacity of the earth and how governments operate, respond and react, underscore his message of how climate change plays a major role in cultural change. Fagan makes the case that in the ancient past, climate change, disasters or climate catastrophes have destroyed civilizations.

His illustrative examples from early Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Moche world of north Peru, the Anasazi of North America, Europe in the Little Ice Age, and the Mayans describe how various cultures responded to severe climate shifts, droughts, floods, and decimation of fish changes in water currents. Various methods were employed, such as simply moving to another location, modifications to the land, exploring flexibility or simply vanishing. Population levels play a large role in Fagan's perceptions of how people can adapt to climate change. It is easier to migrate when the population density is less than when there are many in number. The larger the number, the less flexibility there is to meet the survival challenge. Fagan is a proponent of population control for the future survival of civilization.

Fagan reminds us that man is interrelated with the ecosystems with which we live. He uses scientific understandings and data of El Niño events in order to demonstrate climate changes through history. Fagan gives a warning that "societies already strained by unwise management of the environment" are sometimes pushed past the "breaking point" by short-term climate patterns like El Niño. Even though our civilization might not be destroyed by overpopulation, global warming or rapid climate change, "we remain vulnerable to the forces of climate as never before."

Fagan uses a number of case-studies to argue ways in which societies might respond to climate crises: "movement or social collaboration; muddling from crisis to crisis; decisive, centralized leadership on the part of a few individuals; or developing innovations that increase the carrying capacity of the land" (xvi).

Some societies have avoided having their civilizations collapse by using a combination of technology and intervention by the government. Some were doomed by rigid governmental structure, religious ideologies, and unbalanced population densities that proved unsustainable. Some, such as the Anasazi society, were able to adapt by leaving their urban settlements and relocating in order to escape the conditions in which they found themselves.

Our ability to understand how the world's environmental, and in this case climate, systems work and how we can adapt will mean the difference between collapse and survival. "The

ultimate equation of history balances the needs of the population and the carrying capacity of the land.” (97) According to Fagan, our society’s ability to walk this balance will determine our sustainability. We will either learn to adapt to the earth’s natural environmental systems, or the environment and earth will move without us.

I recommend this book as a thoughtful contribution to an emerging body of work on global environment and eco-civilization in the age of the Anthropocene.