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Review

Clouds: Nature and Culture, Richard Hamblyn, Reaktion Books, London (2017), p. 251, £14.95 paperback

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Throughout human history clouds have played a crucial role, both literally and figuratively, in a vast array of human endeavours. In *Clouds: Nature and Culture* the environmental writer and historian Richard Hamblyn attempts to familiarise the reader with many of the interactions between humans and these visible masses of water suspended in the atmosphere.

Part of the Earth Series, from independent publisher Reaktion Books, the densely packed paperback features 106 wonderful illustrations, ranging from romantic and classical depictions of the sky through to photographs of rare meteorological phenomenon, such as 'hole-punch clouds' (p.187). Hamblyn is well placed to deftly lead us through the subject matter, having already published one book in this series—*Tsunami: Nature and Culture* (2014)—while also being the author of the award winning *The Invention of Clouds* (2001); an approachable and thorough, history of Luke Howard, the Quaker chemist who first attempted to scientifically categorise clouds.

The book is structured thematically, and whilst the result is at times both chronologically and geographically staccato in its coverage, when dealing with a subject matter which itself confounds 'the kind of elemental categories that typically prevail on earth' (p. 8), such an amorphous approach is ultimately befitting. Only in the opening chapter, 'Clouds in Myth and Metaphor' does the text veer towards list territory, as Hamblyn attempts to cram in a large number of examples of clouds in culture; from the ancient to the modern, and from east to west. In chapter two, 'The Natural History of Clouds' the prose becomes more expansive as (unsurprisingly) Luke Howard takes centre-stage, with Hamblyn demonstrating Howard's importance to the history of clouds, via the story of his correspondence with the German poet and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who was greatly influenced by Howard's cloud classification system. Howard also appears in subsequent chapters on 'Clouds in Art, Photography and Music', and makes a cameo in the final chapter 'Future Clouds'. It is in this last chapter, with its coverage of modern metaphors of clouds, such as 'cloud computing' p.174), geo-engineered solutions to a changing climate, and anthropogenic clouds, such as aeroplane contrails (p.181-188), where I felt the book was strongest. Here, in light of the historical narrative already presented, the author encourages the reader to reflect on the future role of clouds, in both our uncertain climatic and geopolitical futures.

Throughout, Hamblyn demonstrates to the reader, how the history of clouds and human society presents a repeating narrative of interaction between artistic and scientific ways of understanding the world. As whether artist or scientist, 'like all fugitive effects, clouds require the presence of a validating observer' (p.88). In showing us how embedded clouds are in so many aspects of human societies, Hamblyn demonstrates the metaphorical power they hold over us. By taking a subject, which so demonstrably straddles many cultural institutions and ways of knowing the world, Hamblyn reminds us that reductive categories and siloed disciplines will always leave us with an understanding of the world that is much lower in resolution than the real thing outside of our windows.

Overall, the book is wide ranging in its approach to thinking about clouds and culture, with an abundance of apt imagery, and based on a vast amount of broad and thorough primary research. Whether reading outright in one sitting, or dipping in as a coffee-table read, all who come to this book, whether historian, geographer, scientist, enthusiast or accidental reader will find something new, novel and of interest about those seemingly fluffy features, that continue to capture our imagination.