

# 'Like volcanoes on the ranges': How Australian bushfire writing has changed with the climate

November 13 2019, by Grace Moore

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After an apparent bushfire, a horse team pulls timber at Lavers Hill in Victoria, circa 1895. Credit: [Museum Victoria/NLA](#)

Bushfire writing has long been a part of Australian literature.

Tales of heroic rescues and bush Christmases describe a time when the fire season was confined only to summer months and Australia's battler identity was forged in the flames.

While some of these early stories may seem melodramatic to the modern reader, they offer vital insights into the scale and timing of fires and provide an important counterpoint to suggestions from [some politicians](#) this week that Australia's fire ecology remains unchanged in the 21st century.

A contender for the first fictional representation of an Australian [bushfire](#) is [Mary Theresa Vidal's The Cabramatta Store](#) (1850).

Although she does not specify a month, Vidal is very clear regarding the season and the oppressive, sweltering heat: "It was one of the hottest days of an unusually hot and dry Australian summer. No breeze stirred the thin, spare foliage of the gum-trees, or moved the thick grove of wattles which grew at the back of a rough log hut."

Vidal's account of the bushfire that ensues is evocative and intense: "The tall trees were some of them red hot to the top; the fire seemed to run apace, and every leaf and stack was so dry there was nothing to impede its progress."

## Postcards from Australia

Vidal was not alone in treating fire as a fleeting, one-off incident. Other early accounts, such as [Ellen Clacy's](#) 1854 romance story *A Bushfire*, or the prolific novelist William Howitt's [A Boy's Adventures in the Wilds of Australia](#) of the same year follow Vidal in depicting the bushfire as an isolated catastrophe.

Howitt's novel takes the form of a notebook kept by Herbert, a recent young migrant, who recounts the wonder of his new life in the Bush. Though he doesn't experience a fire at first-hand, Herbert regales the reader with another family's bushfire adventure in lieu of his own. Yet in closing his account, dated January 14, he writes: "I wonder whether, after all, I shall see a bush-fire. During the last week we have seen lurid smoke by day, and a deep-red cloud by night ... immense fires are raging in the jungle."

For Herbert, surviving a bushfire is a settler rite of passage and again, the dating of his entry emphasizes the fire as a uniquely summer concern. The boyish narrator, though, cannot appreciate the trauma and severity of Antipodean fire.



Exotic and dangerous tales from Australia—these images were published in *The Australasian sketcher*, April 9, 1884—depicted life for settlers and visitors to those back in England. Credit: [Troedel & Co. lithographer/State Library of Victoria](#)

## **An annual event**

Over time, the settler community began to understand fire as a recurring phenomenon and the tone of fire stories shifted from a triumphant celebration of settler endurance, to a more brooding acceptance that the flames would return another year.

So season-bound was this understanding, a sub-genre of bushfire fiction emerged: the Christmas fire story. These works responded to the Victorian enthusiasm for yuletide tales, while at the same time highlighting the often horrific seasonal tribulations of bush-dwellers.

While there are many examples of Christmas fire stories, one of the best-known is Anthony Trollope's novella [Harry Heathcote of Gangoil](#) (1874).

The plot, which takes place in the sugar-growing region of Queensland, revolves around the protagonist Harry's deep fear of fire. Trollope highlights the hostility of the climate, the dangers posed by deforestation, and the deep-rooted anxieties that haunted migrant farmers each summer.

There are countless other works that allow us to map the Victorian era fire season.

Henry Kingsley's sprawling 1859 novel [The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn](#) begins with another date reference: "Near the end of February 1857 ... it was near the latter end of summer, burning hot, with the bushfires raging like volcanoes on the ranges, and the river reduced to a slender stream of water."

Once again here, the date identifies fires specifically with the summertime.

## Climate emergency fiction

While 19th century fire stories offer a date-stamped and clearly defined fire season, today's novelists work with a much less predictable set of environmental conditions.

The backdrops for the crime novelist Jane Harper's thrillers [The Dry](#) (2016) and [The Lost Man](#) (2018) are tinder-dry rural communities, where years of drought mean [fire](#) could erupt at any moment.

Realist writing is capturing changing conditions, just as it did for settlers more than 150 years ago. Australia may always have been the "[continent of fire](#)", as historian Tom Griffiths terms it, but literature shows us those fires are more prolific and less predictable now than ever before.

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