

Jeffrey Parker: *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*: Yale University Press, 2013: 874 pp., illustrations, hardback, £29.99.

This long book would once have been a three-decker. This would have allowed it a larger typeface, more generous margins and made it easier to handle. But multi-volume books are no longer acceptable, more's the pity. Here we have a thoroughly good read and a provocation to thought. Professor Parker aims to explain the ghastly political cock-up that was the seventeenth century (until about 1680) – not just in Europe, but in China, Russia and the Ottoman empire. The professor would say that India and Japan managed to better weather the crisis, as did also the then-outlying continents of America, Africa and Australia. In a series of narrative chapters (first-rate summations, with a beady eye for telling facts and characters), he recounts the depths to which most major states sank during these decades. The causes were manifold and the narrative is a sorry catalogue of incompetence, stupidity, intransigence and human frailty. Into this mix is thrown the coincidental phenomenon of the Little Ice Age, the rigours of which only served to deepen the crisis. Parker's climatological account is horribly fascinating, and the links between the environment and its human occupants are of abiding interest (not least because of our present condition, discussed in a closing section). However, it's worth noting – as does he – that the poor weather continued for some decades after the resolution of our political problems. What seems to come out of this book, to this humble reader at least, is that politicians of the early seventeenth century were dealing with structures that were more complex than their abilities to cope, in particular the 'composite states' that were a feature of this period. These super-states arose in part because of the greater abilities of their rulers to exert control by military means (guns and forts), and the techniques of violence outran the ability to negotiate. It took most of this period to create mechanisms of political discourse sufficiently sophisticated to avoid disaster – and a lot of people died in the process. This is a must-read.

Rachel Laudan: *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History*: University of California Press, November 2013, £27.95

Readers will be familiar with my admiration for Rachel Laudan's food historical lucubrations on her website <<http://www.rachellaudan.com/>>.