



Under the Weather: Us and the Elements

Tom Fort

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Tom Fort, whose writing has been variously described as "jocund," "slightly loopy," "unbelievably poignant," and "deeply peculiar," travels around Britain experiencing some of its extremer climates and some of its more typical, with a view to explaining the British have made of their weather and what it has made of them. There are two interlocking strands: the story of those who—moved to an exceptional, sometimes obsessive degree by the fascination felt by so many—sought to know and understand the weather; and the story of its impact on history, culture, and ways of thought and behavior. He focuses on the people—the clergymen, the gentlemen of leisure, the crackpots, visionaries, charlatans, and shysters, all now largely or utterly forgotten—who volunteered and toiled for the cause, telling their stories by tracking them down to the places—usually their own gardens—where they indulged their quiet passion for measuring rainfall, scrutinizing dewdrops, tapping their barometers, and peering at their thermometers. Once the age of the amateur scientist was over, and the business of weather forecasting was annexed by professionals with state backing, it became a less colorful affair. The historical strand is, in part, a straightforward chronology; an account of the part played by climate in British history; how, when the sun shone and rain fell in gentle abundance, the nation prospered and multiplied; how, when the climate cooled, bringing wet summers and savage winters, they perished by plague and famine and retreated from places made unbelievable; how in time, as the society matured from a rural, peasant society, the weather became less a matter of life and death (though always an absorbing interest). But beyond that there is another dimension to its influence—the moral and spiritual one. This is contentious, but intriguing: the extent to which the British shape their view of "our weather," and the extent to which it may have shaped the British into the people they are.

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