The Weather Experiment: the pioneers who sought to see the future

People around the world are fascinated by weather generally and in particular these days with so many unusual events. This intriguing book describes the explorations and discoveries of people who changed weather from a local phenomenon into a science that explains the why, where, and how of weather. More importantly these new scientists could warn people before harsh storms struck to allow them to postpone travel, particularly by sea, or to mitigate the damage.

On Nov. 23, 1703 an intense storm rammed England with no warning. The Great Storm, as it came to be called, sent ships from the North Sea into Sweden. Many were shipwrecked; thousands of others drowned. Leaders discussed the need for weather forecasting to warn the population of danger before it struck and produced casualties and massive property damage. But alas little happened until the nineteenth century.

Did you ever wonder how meteorology got its name? Historically, +meteors+ referred to any object in the sublunar zone. This included meteors of course, but also lightning, rainbows, clouds, and gusts of wind. The famous Dr. Johnson of dictionary fame defined meteors as ?any bodies in the air or sky that are of flux and transitory nature.?

One of the earliest scientists profiled in this book is Francis Beaufort, an Irish man, who worked on an early telegraph system that could send messages over distance via sight through a gestural code. Beaufort also questioned why weather forecasting could not be done by using ships? logs and transmitting the weather data they all recorded daily to help forecast future storms. If his name sounds familiar to you, it may be because he invented the Beaufort scale where he categorized winds by numbers using the strength or lack of strength as a base. His scale begins with 0 for calm, and 13 for storm.

Before the wind description was poetic and descriptive but could not be compared over distances.
In 1802, Luke Howard, a man no one had heard of before, did a similar thing for clouds. He believed that they could be delineated into categories the way Carl Linnaeus organized plant species. He gave us the system we use today with cumulous, cirrus, stratus, etc.

A side tale here shows how the painter John Constable translated his fascination with giant clouds into paintings including one that became his first major sale, and gave him the impetus to keep painting. The writer is not sure if Constable ever discovered that the man who bought this painting had the sky repainted to be less dramatic.

Moore also describes rampant religious objections to weather being accepted as a science. During the Middle Ages many believed weather came only from God and that it did not follow any logical principles. It was not until the invention of printing when Aristotle?s works were published that people analyzed weather more scientifically. Aristotle wrote about dew, hoar-frost, thunder, clouds, tornadoes and lightning and gave rational reasons for them.

If you have a fascination for weather, nature and the history of science this book is for you. You won?t be bored, and you can regale your friends with strange and unlikely facts. Also, when it pours outside, you can feel a connection to people throughout history who wondered about rain, clouds, and skies that would suddenly turn blue-black.

Posted by Dory L. on December 28, 2015

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