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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Vladimir Jankovic. *Reading the Skies: A Cultural History of English Weather 1650-1820.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. xiv + 272 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-39216-5.



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Given the preoccupation of the English with their weather this book can well claim to be a “cultural history.” Indeed, the role of the daily weather is characteristically an English conversation starter and probably an indicator of social and geographic status of the speaker. The response elicited by such an opening also tells the speaker something of the status of the respondent and therefore confirms an important, if transient, social exchange. This book establishes an historical setting for the prevailing interest in English weather and sets fascinatingly wide social and cultural parameters for this interest over a crucial period of intellectual change from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

This is a scholarly work, as can be seen from its tightly argued 167 pages of text (aptly illustrated by 22 figures and drawings) with 58 pages of notes, 28 pages of bibliography, and 7 pages of index. It is argued in tight prose, at times using perhaps unnecessarily technical terms. It is most readable and informative, nevertheless, for a lay audience interested in the history of the weather or in the development of observational and laboratory science over the period.

The book sets the context of its cultural investigation by posing a number of binaries to be explored throughout its pages: the provinces versus the City; provincial versus urban culture; observations conducted in the field versus

those in the laboratory; the work of individual and private observers versus the collective work of the Royal Society; interest in the exceptional versus general weather patterns; the use of the naked eye versus that of instruments; and qualitative versus quantitative observation.

These differences in approach to the science of meteorology (and chorography which is the study of particular, local geographical, archaeological, and topographical occurrences) are the focus of a discussion set in a very wide cultural landscape and explanatory framework indeed. For the book claims to characterise nothing less than the culture of landed society “during the British ancien regime” (p. 8). Indeed, the argument focuses on the local aspect of the study of weather which is presented as a major resource of the landed interest in opposition to the interest of the crown, the court, and the city. Study of the weather becomes, in this work, a way for local interest to establish its centrality in English culture and political importance as it points to the particularity and specialness of each region with its own highly individual weather and meteorology. In fact, the meteorological events are, in a sense, treated as the property of those who own the land on which these events take place. Weather was the province of learned gentlemen, clergy, and scholars all wishing to establish the credentials of their own locality as noteworthy of marvelling,

observing, and recording. These men were not interested in overall weather patterns but in the dramatic, astonishing, specific manifestations of nature as displayed in their own patch.

There is no attempt here to fall victim to the “presentist” Whiggery of looking for the “origins” of modern meteorology. Indeed it is the differences from the modern laboratory science which the book emphasizes (though there is perhaps a hint of the recent tendency to re-write the “scientific revolution” as a nineteenth- rather than a seventeenth-century phenomenon.) The book concentrates on detailed accounts of seventeenth and early eighteenth century works describing local meteor phenomena as part of recording local archaeology, chorography, antiquities and observations of natural phenomena. This genre is typified by Robert Plot’s natural histories of Oxfordshire and Staffordshire, Aubrey’s Wiltshire, and later John Morton’s Northamptonshire, Charles Leigh’s Lancashire, Cheshire, and Derbyshire, a long analysis of William Borlase’s Cornwall and the famous 1790 parochial study by Gilbert White, *Natural History of Selborne*. All these fall into the category of local, particular, observational study, and they eschew any attempt to draw out generalizations about meteorological phenomena, let alone laws of the weather.

Although the last two chapters of the book move on to more laboratory-based science towards the end of the eighteenth century the emphasis throughout is with one side of the binary opposites which are laid out in the Introduction, focusing on the ongoing tradition of local phenomena studied by local gentlemen and clerics. The emphasis on providential uses of meteorological phenomena to set out the will of God—and perhaps to count the locality’s blessings, as well as the establishment of such events as pertaining to provincial separateness and difference—allows Jankovic to treat these writings as part of the culture of the Tory landed local magnates rather

than the national and international, courtly, Whig tradition associated with urban institutionalized “science.”

Such a strong emphasis on the specific and local, however, does sideline the work of significant people in the Royal Society and its correspondents. For example, Robert Hooke’s paper (Royal society Classified Papers, 20 No. 240 published in part by Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society*) provides a very different set of parameters for the study of weather. There and elsewhere Hooke published his ideas about establishing the ‘Causes or Laws of Weather’. As part of this enterprise he included and described for his audience a “Scheme at one View representing to the Eye the Observations of the Weather for a Month.” He circulated this “scheme” to local observers to collect information tabulated and quantified as well as allowing for verbal descriptions of unusual meteorological items. Hooke’s own private diary (Guildhall Library MS1758) some of which was published in *The Diary of Robert Hooke*, ed. Henry Robinson and Walter Adams (London, 1935, reprinted London, 1968) follows closely the observational conventions he set out in the “Scheme.” This suggests that the people working within and outside the Royal Society could not easily be classified within the local tradition which Jankovic so strongly emphasizes although that tradition was called into use for the purposes of producing a predictable and law-like account of the history of the weather for the whole of England.

It is, perhaps, only just and fair that Jankovic—concerned as he is with the local and particular—does not consider contemporary continental studies of weather for such a wider survey was outside his province. It would be wrong to ask the writer of an excellent study to do more, or different work. And this is, indeed, a scholarly and very readable work on a subject of continuing wide interest—the English weather.

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