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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed March 29, 1928

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THE WORD "METEOROLOGY"

"Meteor" is the English form of a Greek word meaning a thing lifted up from the ground. The ancients classed as "meteors" all the atmospheric phenomena with which they were familiar, besides several things now known to lie beyond the limits of the atmosphere. Thus Aristotle in his work entitled "Meteorologica" discusses not only such things as winds, clouds, rainbows, lightning, etc., but also shooting-stars, comets and the milky way, and (inconsistently with the literal meaning of the word "meteor") earthquakes, springs, rivers and the ocean.

In present-day English the word "meteor" means either (1) an atmospheric phenomenon, or (2) a shooting star. A scholarly writer in addressing scholarly readers does not hesitate to use the word in the first of these senses, but in what Mr. Mencken calls "the vulgate" the second meaning prevails to the exclusion of the other. Moreover, astronomers universally call shooting-stars "meteors". Thus, astronomical societies have "meteor sections" for observing these bodies, and the American Meteor Society exists for the same purpose.

In view of the facts just stated it is a paradox - and one leading to some confusion - that the term "meteorology" is applied exclusively to the science of the atmosphere and of weather and never to the study of shooting-stars (which, by the way, is nameless). A century or more ago meteorology had several aliases. By certain writers of the eighteenth century it was variously called "aerology", "aerography", and "aerometry". In the first half of the nineteenth century the term "atmospherology" struggled for recognition. Today, however, the name "meteorology" (with its corresponding forms in other languages and its many derivatives) is unshakably established in the vocabulary.

"Aerology" has had for more than twenty years a different meaning. By international agreement it is applied to the branch of meteorology dealing with the upper or "free" atmosphere.

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