

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed April 14, 1928

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RAINING CATS AND DOGS

The expression "rain cats and dogs," though it is ignored in the New English Dictionary, was known before the middle of the eighteenth century, for the following passage occurs in Dean Swift's "Polite Conversation", published in 1738: "I know Sir John will go, though he was sure it would rain cats and dogs." It has been variously explained.

A writer in "Notes and Queries" says: "The male blossoms of the willow tree, which are used on Palm Sunday to represent the branches of the palm, are called cats and dogs in many parts of England. They increase in size rapidly after a few warm April showers, and the belief formerly prevailed that the rain brought them down. Hence the saying 'to rain cats and dogs'".

According to another suggestion "cats and dogs" is a corruption of the French word "catadoupe", or "catadupe", meaning a waterfall.

A prolix and unconvincing explanation is given in Brewer's "Dictionary of Phrase and Fable", under "Rain". This author traces the phrase to ancient Scandinavian myths relating to cats and dogs.

An alternative English expression is to "rain pitchforks", while in various British dialects we hear of raining "hop-poles", "pickels" (meaning pitchforks), "hatchets and duckets", "auld wives and pig-taps", etc.

The French say: "Il pleut des hallebardes" ("It rains halberds").

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