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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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REFORMING THE ALMANAC

The foolish custom of publishing weather forecasts for an entire year in the almanacs, now happily on the wane, was once universal. Benjamin Franklin included such predictions in his "Poor Richard's Almanack" (though he made fun of them in the same publication) and they appeared in the almanacs issued throughout the eighteenth century by the Prussian Academy of Sciences, with the exception of the one for the year 1779. How they happened to be omitted that year and restored the year following has been related by Dr. Gustav Hellmann.

The academy, originally known as the Prussian Society of Sciences, was established by royal decree in the year 1700. It was granted a monopoly of almanac-publishing for Prussia and the sale of the almanac was its only source of income. According to the custom of the times the publication contained not only long-range weather predictions but also list of days supposed to be favorable or unfavorable for blood-letting, the weaning of babies, etc., and much other superstitious nonsense.

The almanac for 1779 contained a notice explaining that these features were misleading and had accordingly been eliminated. The public - alas! - did not take kindly to the change. The reformed work was abused and ridiculed on all sides, and so few copies were sold that the issue of that year is one of the rarest of books. The academy, faced with the prospect of losing its sole revenue, was obliged to revert to the old style of publication. This humiliating situation lasted until 1804, when the academy received a grant of state funds for its support and its monopoly of almanac-making was withdrawn.

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