

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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Thomas Stevenson, father of Robert Louis Stevenson, the novelist, was one of the leading engineers of his time and was much interested in various meteorological problems relating to his profession. He served as honorary secretary of the Scottish Meteorological Society for many years up to the time of his death and published several meteorological papers. It was he who introduced the term "gradient", borrowed from engineering, to describe the variation of barometric pressure per unit distance, and he is today especially remembered by meteorologists as the designer of the "Stevenson screen" for thermometers.

Less well known is the fact that Robert Louis himself, at the age of 22, published a meteorological paper in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. It is entitled "On the Thermal Influence of Forests", and was communicated to the society in 1873. A proposal had lately been made to plant trees on an extensive scale in the nearly treeless island of Malta with a view to increasing its water supply and improving its climate. Stevenson gives a well-reasoned and conservative discussion of the relations of trees to climate and he ends his paper with the excellent suggestion that, if the proposed afforestation scheme should be carried out, a careful test of the climatic results ought to be made by means of series of meteorological observations before and after the planting of the trees.

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