

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE RAIN TREE OF FERRO

Ever since the fourteenth century stories have been told of the "til" or "rain tree" of the island of Ferro, in the Canaries, said to have once supplied drinking water for the whole island, which contains no springs. Apparently the story is not altogether mythical. Ferro is a mountainous island, rising in the interior to a height of nearly 5,000 feet. The uplands are frequently enveloped in drifting clouds, which deposit a great deal of moisture on the trees and other vegetation, and the moisture thus collected is shed upon the ground -- a process known to meteorologists as "fog-drip". There appears to be reason to believe that a large laurel tree, since blown down by a storm, once actually did provide the people of Ferro with enough water to eke out to a useful degree the scanty rainfall.

Writing of this tree in his "Theatrum Botanicum", published in 1640, John Parkinson says: "In some parts of the world besides are found the like trees, the leaves whereof and branches doe perpetually droppe water (in the whole island there being<sup>no</sup> other water to be had) a thicke mist as it were or cloud encompassing it continually, except when the Sunne shineth bright thereon; which water being kept as it were in a fountain made for the purpose to retaine it, serveth the whole island for their use."

As to the similar trees in other parts of the world mentioned in this curiously mixed-up sentence, it should be stated that not all rain tree stories can be explained as cases of fog-drip. Plants growing in a humid atmosphere frequently exude moisture in liquid form from their leaves, because evaporation is not active enough to carry off the water drawn up from the roots. Lastly active "showers" under trees are often due to the secretion of honey-dew by plant lice, scale insects and other insects. A species of leaf-hopper, *Proconia undata*, is responsible for a majority of such occurrences in this country.

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