

Released upon receipt  
but intended for use  
December 18, 1930.

A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed December 11, 1930

By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,  
Authority on Meteorology.

RHETORICAL IMBECILITIES

One of the most familiar of literary phenomena is the author who, writing in a didactic vein about the manifestations of nature, substitutes specious rhetoric for sound science -- and gets away with it.

Take Thoreau. In blithesome ignorance of what every schoolboy is supposed to know about optics, he claims, in "Walden," that he was once enveloped in the base of a rainbow. "It chanced," he says, "that I stood in the very abutment of a rainbow's arch, which filled the lower stratum of the atmosphere, tinging the grass and leaves around and dazzling me as if I looked through colored crystal. It was a lake of rainbow light, in which, for a short time, I lived like a dolphin."

John Burroughs (another shining example) tries to set Thoreau right in the Atlantic Monthly for July, 1920. After imparting a good deal of scrambled information about rainbows he turns his attention to the phenomenon of the "sun drawing water," and concludes with the statement: "What the explanation is of those spokes of light proceeding from those openings in the clouds, as if the sun were just behind them, when it is so far away that its rays to human eyes would seem parallel with one another, I do not know." Apparently it never occurred to him to look the matter up in a treatise on atmospheric optics! It is to be feared, indeed, that he did not even suspect the existence of such works.

But Ruskin beats them all. No museum of imbecility is complete without a copy of his book "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century," in which he raves about a portentous "plague-cloud," accompanied by a terrible "plague-wind," that he supposes to have prevailed for some twenty years in Europe; tells us how the winds have acquired the habit of "hissing" instead of "whining," and so on, through a hundred and fifty driveling pages.

The world is indeed full of a number of things.

(All rights reserved by Science Service, Inc.)

-----  
SCIENCE SERVICE  
21st and B Sts.  
Washington, D. C.