

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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WILL-O'-THE-WISP

In recent years meteorologists have been making praiseworthy efforts to sift all available records of ball lightning in order to clear the way for an elucidation of this long-standing atmospheric mystery. Is it not time to undertake similar analyses of the even more numerous records of will-o'-the-wisp, or ignis fatuus?

The facts relating to will-o'-the-wisp are entangled in a great mass of superstition and folklore, but cannot, for that reason, be entirely "explained away." Some reports of the phenomenon come from unimpeachable sources. Here is a case reported not many years ago by Dr. Matthew Luckiesh, the well-known illuminating engineer and physicist:

Dr. Luckiesh was tramping one dark night over the desert between Goodsprings, Nevada, and Ivanpah, California. About 2 a.m. he came to an area where a shower and melting mountain snows had left shallow pools of water. Suddenly a light was seen floating in the air about five feet above the ground. As its distance and size were unknown it might have been a light in a cabin window but for the fact that there was no human habitation within twenty miles of the spot.

Presently the light sailed off some distance to the left and then stopped. Soon others appeared; some floating apparently stationary, others darting here and there. When the display was at its height hundreds of individual lights were visible simultaneously. The display was continuous during the hour or more that the water-covered area was being traversed and may, says Dr. Luckiesh, have continued for days. He believes the lights were little streams of gas, of some sort, which took fire in the air and were blown about by the wind. What kind of gas or gases would explain this observation and others like it? The question ought to be answerable, if at all, in chemical laboratories.

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