

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THAT EQUINOCTIAL STORM

As the autumnal equinox draws near many people will be asking: "When shall we have the equinoctial storm?" According to popular notions, this storm is due somewhere around the time of the equinox (which falls this year on September 23), but not necessarily on that very day. A spell of bad weather occurring within a week or so before or after the date in question is likely to be regarded as the "equinoctial." Not only are popular ideas elastic about the date of the event, but there is also much uncertainty as to whether the so-called "storm" is a gale of wind or a long, soaking rain, or both.

The tradition of the equinoctial storm originated in the Old World ages before there were any weather maps from which people could learn just how much stormy weather actually prevailed at any particular time of the year. In Europe both the vernal and the autumnal equinoxes were supposed to be stormy - not in any particular place, but everywhere. Of course we know now, as our ancestors did not, that universal storminess at any one time never happens. Examine a weather map of the northern hemisphere for a date near an equinox - or any other date in the year - and you will find several regions where stormy weather prevails, but there is always a much larger total area without such weather.

So at the time of the equinox, every year, there are several storms in progress in different parts of the world, but which of these is "the" equinoctial storm no Solomon can decide. Also there is, at every equinox, an even greater prevalence of quiet weather, and it is only because storms are more noticeable and rememberable than calms that no tradition of an "equinoctial calm" prevails in the world.

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