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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed May 20, 1932

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WHY "FORECASTS"?

Why are weather predictions generally called "forecasts"? Here is the reason:

The father of scientific weather predictions in Great Britain was Admiral Robert FitzRoy, and the first public announcements of this character were issued in 1861 from the Meteorological Department of the Board of Trade, which was under his direction. Weather prognostications had previously been almost the exclusive product of quacks and charlatans. For a dignified government office to embark upon the business of issuing them seemed, to many educated people, quite on a par with charging the Astronomer Royal with the task of casting horoscopes.

There is much virtue in a name. A few years ago the United States Bureau of Fisheries overcame the prejudice of the American people to dogfish as an item of diet by changing its name to "grayfish". Similarly, FitzRoy induced the British public to take his weather predictions seriously by calling them "forecasts". The word was not new, but it did not have the objectionable connotations of the words "prophecy" and "prognostication".

The dictionaries tell us to accent "forecast" on the second syllable when it is used as a verb. This injunction is, however, quite generally ignored by meteorologists on both sides of the Atlantic.

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