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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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"FORECASTS"

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

The initiator of scientific weather predictions in Great Britain was Admiral Robert FitzRoy, and the first public announcements of this sort were issued in 1861 from the Meteorological Department of the Board of Trade, which was under his direction. Weather prognostications, except of a purely local character, had previously been almost the exclusive product of quacks and charlatans. To embark a dignified government establishment upon the business of issuing them seemed to many educated people about on a par with adding the casting of horoscopes to the tasks of the Astronomer Royal.

There is much virtue in a name. Some years ago the United States Bureau of Fisheries overcame popular prejudice 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, by the way, tell us to accent "forecast" on the second syllable when the word is used as a verb, but this injunction is not widely obeyed by meteorologists on either side of the Atlantic.

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