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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,  
Authority on Meteorology.

CANNONADING AND RAINFALL

The belief that discharges of cannon and other noisy explosions tend to cause rain appears to be immortal. It is a fallacy, but so widespread that the average human being does not even realize that anybody holds a contrary opinion.

In one of the fights that precluded the battle of Waterloo the English troops retired and were subjected to the brisk fire of twenty-four French guns. Heavy rain was falling at the time. In his account of this episode the historian Thiers writes:

"If the Emperor had refrained from this rear guard engagement, in which he caused twenty-four cannon to be fired furiously at the retreating English columns, the rain would have ceased."

Note that there is nothing tentative or speculative about his language. Thiers supposed the production of rain by cannonading to be a universally admitted scientific fact.

During the wet summer of 1910 in England, farmers of the southern counties petitioned the Admiralty to postpone the gun-practice of the fleet in the Solent until they had got in their crops, which were being ruined by too much water. The petitioners doubtless regarded the connection between gunfire and rainfall as axiomatic and beyond controversy.

Ages ago -- long before the invention of gunpowder -- battles were believed to cause rain; one notion being that the gods sent showers to cleanse the battlefields. The belief that water can be jostled out of the clouds by explosions is merely the modern version of this ancient superstition. There is not an atom of truth in it.

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