

Weather Lore

Dr John S. Reid

Department of Physics, The University, Aberdeen AB24 3UE

The old sayings and rhymes used by our forefathers are rapidly being forgotten. How reliable were these predictions? The following is based on an article written by the author in 1979.

Our weather lore is a folk heritage of "*sayings wise and otherwise*" that we all dip into from time to time. Yet, being able to hear the weather forecast every few hours on radio or TV, fewer and fewer people bother with the old lore. Some pessimists even fear that our forefathers' wisdom will eventually be lost for ever. In one of the last editions of *Scottish Notes and Queries* in November 1934, a correspondent wrote:

"The behavior and direction of birds in flight; the movement of animals, wild and tame; the billowy mist on the hilltop; the voice of the streams; the course of the fleeting smoke; the omens of the moon; the rising and setting of the sun - all these will cease to have their one-time significance in life out of doors"

But are we really losing a heritage of any value? It has been said that there would be a scant troop of sayings left after the halt, lame and unfit members had been weeded out by the time-honoured tests of experience, facts, figures and commonsense. I'm not sure whether it helps us decide on this matter, but it is certainly entertaining to browse through some of our old weather lore.

Where should we begin? Well, there is no doubt it must be in the great era for gathering weather sayings, the 19th century. I have round me a collection of books and articles of last century, with perhaps 2000 quotations ranging from the oral traditions of farming and fisher folk through lengthy passages from literature of all ages, to ditties found around sundials, weather houses and on porcelain. There are quotations to suit almost every circumstance, even catering for the skeptic: *Ill weather is seen soon enough when it comes*. Let's begin by looking through the year.

A January spring is worth naething is confirmed by If the grass grow in Janiveer, 'Twill be the worse for't all the year.

Neither was good weather in February appreciated in the countryside:

*Aa the months o the year,
Curse a fair Februar.*

For many parts of Scotland, Candlemas (February 2) must be about mid-winter.

*If Candlemas Day be fair and clear,
There'll be twa winters in the year.*

Or this version:

*If Candlemas Day be bright and fair,
The half o winter's to come and mair.*

*If Candlemas Day be wet and foul,
The half o winter's gone at Yule.*

About the most that can be said for this rhyme is that spells of settled cold weather lasting several weeks can occur at that time of year, and if such a spell has just started, making Candlemas a bright, sharp day, then snow and some hard winter weather could follow. Certainly there is nothing special about Candlemas, Martinmas or any of the Saints' days that makes them any more useful for predicting weather than any other day in the year. In fact rhymes that try to predict the weather more than a few days ahead are not correct any more often than someone choosing between the alternatives by tossing a coin. Of course sometimes even the most fanciful rhymes prove correct, quite by chance, but the good rhymes steer clear of long-term weather predictions.

As for spring:

*A dry March, wet April and cool May
Fill barn, cellar and bring much hay.*

Everyone is agreed that *A wet March makes a sad harvest*. The very common adage that *March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb* seems to imply that spring comes in early April, which our flowers at least say is a bit soon:

*April showers
Make May flowers.*

The advice:

*Till may be out,
Change nae a clout*

is thought amongst people I have talked with to refer to the mayflower or hawthorn blossom rather than the month. This makes better sense than suggesting, as many quotations do, that the whole of May isn't warm, and this is perhaps confirmed by the tradition that households are supposed to keep their fires burning only in the months with an "r" in them.

*A leaky May and a dry June
Bring cheap meal and harvest soon*

doesn't quite agree with

*A dripping June
Brings all things in tune.*

There is never any shortage of conflicting advice in weather proverbs. Passing over St John, St Peter, St Paul and other saints of June, we find *Ne'er trust a July sky* as good advice from Shetland. The forty days of rain associated with St Swithin (July 15th) and sometimes with other saints is a piece of meteorological nonsense that refuses to die even though meteorological records have long shown the prediction untrue. Before good records were kept it was realized by many that *neither Paul nor Swithin rule the clouds and winds*, but ever since his death in the year 862 St Swithin has been remembered by more people than he could ever have imagined.

In August *After Lammas, corn ripens as much by night as by day*, but we then come upon the silly season for monthly rhymes in which predictions are made about the whole or part of winter based upon the weather for one or two days in autumn. If weather patterns were as simple as this, forecasting would be much more successful than it is. Indeed, trying to decide which weather sayings were good and which were not was a real spur to encourage the progress of meteorology in the mid 19th century. Let me digress a little to illustrate this.

In 1863 one Arthur Mitchell drew up a "Collection of the Popular Weather Prognostics of Scotland" and through the good offices of the Marquis of Tweeddale they were submitted to the Scottish Meteorological Society and published in the *Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal*. The society offered "a prize of twenty guineas for the best scientific explanation of the prognostics" the prize being given "in the form of a gold medal, a piece of plate or otherwise as the successful competitor may desire". Along with Mitchell's prognostics was published a long letter from him and from which it is well worth quoting.

"While making this collection, I embraced every opportunity which offered of conversing with those who were reputedly good weather prophets, and I found two points of practical importance on which all appear to agree.

1. No sign is considered *infallible*. 'It is not the less a sign, however', said a cautious and intelligent observer, who added 'we all trust the barometer, yet even it sometimes fails, and the clouds, *well understood*, are only a little less certain.'
2. A prediction is seldom founded on a *single sign*. Never, indeed, have I seen the system of 'putting that and that together' in more extensive operation. I have been told, again and again, that only by so doing can the coming weather with any certainty be predicted."

This is good advice from Arthur Mitchell. It was by observing closely the *many* signs that "weather-wise fowk" really came into their own. They could, and still can, give reliable forecasts over a period of a day or two.

Rain probably has more sayings associated with its coming than any other kind of weather. Many people nowadays notice the watery pale yellow sunset, the thickening black cloud and falling barometer as clear signs of coming rain. There are a host more indications, and the following come from a copy in the Kilmarnock Library of *A Handbook of Weather Folklore*, by the Rev. C. Swainson, published in 1873. Upon the approach of rain it is alleged:

"Chairs and tables tend to creak; the flame of a lamp crackles or flares; soot falls down the chimney; flies cling much to the ceiling or disappear; mice run about more than usual; beetles are more troublesome than usual; worms appear in unusual numbers; sparrows chirp a great deal; blackbirds sing much in the morning; swallows fly very low; cocks crow late and early, clapping their wings unusually; the scarlet pimpernel closes its flower, dogs eat grass . . ."

Many more signs are given. My own mother swears that cats wash behind their ears only upon the approach of rain. I always doubted this. We had a cat for about 15 years in our house, and after 15 years of careful observation of its ablutions my mother was convinced of the truth of the adage and I still firmly doubted it. Such is the difficulty of establishing weather lore!

There is a very widely held belief that unusually clear visibility precedes a spell of rain: *The further the sight, the nearer the rain*. Each district has its own version. For example, it is said that, “*When to the people about Arbroath the Bell Rock light is particularly brilliant, rain is expected.*” The reason is not at all obvious. Hoping to throw some light on the matter, I obtained a copy of an account by Alexander Cruickshank of his daily observations on how far inland he could see from his house just south of Aberdeen. He recorded the visibility at midday for the 21 years 1856 to 1876. Every day he made a note of the farthest hilltop he could see, from the choice of the nearest, Clochandichter, only five miles away, to the farthest, Lochnagar, 50 miles away. On about 90 days of the year he could see the full 50 miles, and on average throughout the year a distance of 25 miles. Who in an area with any industry can see that sort of distance nowadays?

Another interesting statistic found by Cruickshank was that the average visibility continuously increased from winter to summer just as the average humidity decreased. This tentatively suggests that although the proverb about clear days is widespread it might not be very reliable.

The most obvious sign of coming rain is a lowering cloud level, and there are many local couplets similar to

*When Falkland Hill puts on his cap,
The Howe of Fife will get a drap*

or the more general East Coast proverb about mist:

*When the mist comes from the hills
Ye'll get water for your mills;
When the mist comes from the sea,
Fair weather it will be.*

This one stands up well to meteorological examination. When a spell of continuous rain seemed as if it might be clearing away, my mother used to say (and surely the best weather lore is passed down the generations by word of mouth!), “*If you see enough blue sky to patch a pair of sailor's trousers, soon there will be enough to make him a complete suit*” and it is often so.

For fishermen round the coasts, whether they were netting for herring, lining for white fish or working the inshore salmon coble, a good eye for the weather could literally be a matter of life or death. The rain didn't matter so much, but storms and wind did (and still do).

*Mackerel skies and mares' tails
Gay mony a ship carry furl'd sails*

is a good observation because high cirrus clouds very often give about six hours warning of an approaching cyclone with its associated fronts and strong winds.

Several rhymes convey this message:

When rain comes before wind,

*Halyards, sheets and braces mind;
When wind comes before rain,
Soon you may make sail again.*

The landlubber may say that

*Nae weather is ill,
If the wind bide still*

but the sailor running out of wind is quite likely "*to whistle for the wind.*" In my limited experience under sail, this appears to work surprisingly often in our waters. The reason is that calm, windless spells of ten to fifteen minutes quite often occur between one weather pattern passing and a new one coming from a different quarter. Even when one knows the reason, whistling for the wind and having it appear is a satisfying exercise.

"*Every wind has its weather,*" and there are variations over the country of this rhyme:

*When the wind's in the north,
Hail comes forth:
When the wind is in the wast,
Look for a weet blast.
When the wind is in the soud,
The weather will be gude:
When the wind is in the east,
Cald and snaw come neist.*

or

*When the wind is in the east,
It is neither good for man nor beast*

but, according to an Orcadian saying, "*The west wind is a gentleman, and goes to bed.*" Actually, it is very common, especially on the coast, for any wind to drop in the evening.

Once one has started dipping into the old saws it is difficult to stop. Nothing escapes a comment: thunder and lightning, stars and meteors, sun and moon, sea and fish, animals and insects; trees and flowers, frost and snow. For example "*When fires burn faster than usual, and with a blue flame, frosty weather may be expected*" seems true.

However, I don't believe in

*Mony hawes,
Mony snaws.*

I think this one is nearer the mark:

*Mony rains,
Mony rowans.*

The moon is particularly rich in lore. I once met a French peasant, a very jovial man, whose sowing, weeding and reaping were all done according to old sayings concerning the waxing and waning of the moon. Now, in spite of looking hard for connections, meteorologists have found no correspondence between the phases of the moon and the weather, and I would pay little attention to proverbs which say there is. Nonetheless, the moon is a handy light behind the clouds which shows up the nature of those clouds and the clarity of the atmosphere.

*Clear moon,
Frost soon*

is good in winter. “*When the moon has a white look, and her outline is not very clear, rain or snow is looked for.*”

Approaching bad weather is quite well predicted by a halo around the moon and is widely held to be augured by “*the new moon in the old moon's arms.*” This refers to ‘earthshine’, light reflected from Earth’s clouds onto the unlit side of the moon. It is caused by global cloudiness, rather than local cloudiness.

Weather is a bit like news - it is the bad that gets most attention, not the good. I have tried to pick out some weather lore that is useful at least in certain weather conditions. It is easy to appreciate that forecasting is a complex subject, and it is not surprising that our Victorian predecessors tried to put the science of meteorology on a better foundation. *Weather Warnings for Watchers*, by "The Clerc Himself" was published in 1877, containing not a collection of weather rhymes but details of how accurate barometers, thermometers, hygrometers and other instruments were made and how they could be used with intelligent observations to make local weather forecasts. Our Victorian forefathers began the science of weather forecasting that today is much more successful than the old weather lore, thanks to a huge effort involving weather satellites, some of the most powerful computers in the world, international co-operation and communications and a genuine broad understanding of how the atmosphere-ocean system works. The progress we take for granted today has cost over a century and a half of effort and there is still a lot more to do.

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