# TURNED OUT NICE AGAIN

## On Living With the Weather

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WHEN HURRICANE SANDY'S SIEGE of New York last autumn [2012] was smartly followed by waves of marauding floods in Britain, the closing acts in a year of numbing gloom and damp, the idea of 'global warming' began to sound a rather black joke. Ten years ago, some optimists were relishing the prospects of olive groves on the South Downs. Now it looks as if we may be heading full steam for the state of Newfoundland.

But scientists, if we'd listened properly, have always insisted that climate change can't be neatly translated into weather patterns. It's likely to generate incoherence, extreme events. Climate may be the big slow-moving backdrop, but weather is what happens here and now, to our settlements and landscapes, to *us*. In that sense,

it's part of our popular culture. And that is what I will be exploring in this book, how weather enters and affects our daily lives in Britain, how we talk and write about it, make it the stuff of nostalgia and dreads and, in these uncertain times, how it changes the way we think and feel, about ourselves and the future.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by something that happened to me back in the 1980s – as turbulent a time as today, despite our selective memories insisting otherwise. It was an autumn afternoon, and I was meandering through a favourite wood in the Chilterns full of ancient, cranky beech trees. Frithsden has always been an epic weather theatre, a place where freak frosts can scorch the bracken as early as September, and south-westerly gales routinely strew the ground with 300-year-old gothic pollards. It was becoming a kind of woodwreck by then, I suppose, but also gave off the aura of a wood-henge; and whatever melancholy I felt walking among the fallen was always balanced by a frisson of excitement that

something wonderfully Promethean was happening inside the green chaos.

Well, on that particular afternoon the weather upped the stakes. Out of a clear blue sky (how we love our weather metaphors!) it began to pour, in sheets. The rain was ferocious, spattering off the golden leaves in silver jets. The whole wood began to change colour, the trunks slicking to slate grey, next year's beech-buds glistening like glazed fruit. I huddled under the nearest holly and realised that I'd gone to ground right next to the remains of a dear departed. It was the tree I called the 'Praying Beech', on account of two branch stubs that had fused across it just like a pair of clasped hands. Four years earlier it had been split open by a lightning strike. Bees had nested in the hollow gash. Then it was toppled in a storm. Now this gargantuan supplicant, half as tall as our parish church, was prostrate on the ground. And it was liquefying in front of my eyes. The rain was hammering drills of water at the already rotting trunk, and flakes of bark, fungal ooze, barbecued dregs from the lightning-charred

heartwood, began to drip onto the woodland floor like thick arboreal soup.

Peering out from my bush I was mesmerised. I was witnessing the dissolution of a tree, but also what felt like the beginning of something new, the elements of forest life returning to the crucible. The alchemy wrought by that storm changed my whole view of weather and the resilience of nature.

By any standards it was a spectacular weather event. If I hadn't been the only witness, it could have become a star piece of local mythology, part of that ceaseless, nagging narrative we British have about the weather. The poet Samuel Coleridge, one of the greatest writers on what in his day were called 'Meteors', would have relished the bizarre vision of a dissolving tree. On 26 July, 1802, when a day of topsy-turvy Cumbrian weather had left the sky dotted with flotillas of motionless clouds, looking, he thought, 'like the surface of the moon seen thro' a telescope', he'd had a brainwave. Why didn't he write a set of posters – 'Playbills' he called them – 'announcing

each day the performance by his supreme Majesty's Servants, the Clouds, Waters, Sun , Moon, Stars.'

He never got round to it, but I reckon his scheme might go down well today. The playbills would be rather eye-catching, stuck on parish noticeboards alongside the programmes of the local dramatic society. 'Melting tree on the common!' 'Lightning scar on church door!' 'Five-foot icicles hanging round the council offices – keep a careful distance!'

We're often mocked for our national obsession with weather, and the fact that some blindingly obvious remark about it is often the first greeting we make to a fellow human. 'Turned out nice again' we say, or 'The winds got up'. Our comments are usually banal catch-phrases, hardly conversation at all, signs perhaps of our stiff – maybe *frozen*-stiff – upper-lips. But I find it heartening that we use these coded phrases as a kind of acknowledgement that we're all in the weather together. *Of course* we should be preoccupied. It's the one circumstance of life which we share in common. It

affects our bodies, our moods, our behaviour, the structure of our environments. It can change the cost of living and the likelihood of death. It is a kind of common language itself.

And though much of the time we complain about our climatic lot, about our seemingly inexorable legacy of insidious rain and grey skies, there's a little bit of us that relishes rough weather, just so long as it doesn't move into truly malevolent mode. So, we swing between sulky resentment and playful derring-do. The municipal gritters never arrive on time, our plumbing is a disaster, but come the first decent snowfall and we are out playing truant with the toboggans. On the first day of December our local pub in Norfolk throws down the gauntlet by announcing – in its own version of the Coleridgean playbill – a 'Guess the Date of the First Snowfall' competition, pinned on a board next to the biggest wood-burner in the district. We can make any pastime into a winter sport. I once watched the annual Oxford and Cambridge rugby match played with mad gallantry in

four inches of snow and a temperature of minus six C. Glastonbury is now as much a mud festival as a music festival, and has turned the Wellington boot into a fashion item.

Our creative sparring with the climate flourishes when it comes to clothing. The 'Country Life' style has always been ridiculed for its pomposity and obvious discomfort, but vernacular weather togs are another matter. I love seeing folded newspaper sun-hats and knotted handkerchief on the beach and fieldworkers donning fertiliser bags in summer storms. Once, by the River Dove in Derbyshire, I watched a gang of five-year-olds picking the rhubarb-sized leaves of butterbur to make themselves umbrellas during a downpour. I've no idea whether they were just aping modern brollies, or had the same instinctive sympathy with plants that led the ancient Greeks to name butterbur *petasos*, meaning a broad-brimmed hat. On another cold and showery day in 1802, Dorothy Wordsworth and her beloved brother William buttoned themselves up together

in a big 'Guard's coat', and Dorothy coyly confessed that she 'liked the hills and the rain the better for bringing us so close to one another …'

These ambivalent, not so say contrary, responses to the weather – fury at the 'wrong sort of snow on the line' co-existing with a breakfast-table thrill at hoar-frost turning the trees to lacework – are special to Britain. They happen because we haven't really the foggiest idea about what, day on day, to expect, so that any slightly untoward disturbance of the atmosphere is regarded as an unnatural affront or, then again, an unexpected benediction. Sudden snow-falls and un-forecast heat-waves throw us equally. Because of where we live, on an island in the middle of the Atlantic Storm Belt, just offshore from a huge, breathing, land-mass, our meteorological lot is messy and erratic, whether we like it or not. We can't acclimatise, reconcile ourselves to these repeated bolts from the blue. In reality our climate is quite mellow. We don't have to live with active volcanoes or sudden tsu-namis. The temperature has only exceeded

100 degrees three times in the last hundred years. The heaviest rainfall in a single day was eleven inches in Martinstown Dorset on 18 July, 1955. When you compare that with the several feet that can fall in a couple of hours in a tropical monsoon you can get our weather in some kind of perspective. What we really suffer from is a *whimsical* climate, and that can be tougher to cope with than knowing for sure you're going to be under three feet of snow every December.

And hanging over all of us now is that more sinister unpredictable, climate change. It's already happening, and there are few encouraging signs that we're willing, or able, to do anything about it. But how it might translate into local weather is hard to predict. Even harder is imagining how we and the rest of creation will react. Living organisms aren't passive victims even when the climate they're experiencing is changing at unprecedented speed.

But if we are bequeathed a new climate, of whatever sort, its bouts of maverick weather won't necessarily be unfamiliar. The best antidote to an attack of 'we've

never had it so bad' is simply to look back clearly at the past. Every extreme and nuance of weather has been experienced in Britain before, at least for a spell. And for at least 400 years, writers, painters, scientists and folk in the street have left records of our legacy of outrageous, beautiful, violent, glorious, mysterious and simply down-home-ordinary weather, and how they – and we – reacted to it. We have more weather proverbs than the Inuit, proverbially, have descriptions for snow. Constable and Turner's paintings brim over with weather, as do the works of modern artists like Kurt Jackson. We have weather symphonies and weather nursery rhymes. And it would be hard to find an English writer whose diaries don't carry, under the dominant melody of their daily lives, the choral hum of sun-dried grass and windblown leaves and subterranean water. Dorothy Wordsworth was Coleridge's gentler, domestic soul-mate, and in March 1802 recalls watching 'Little Peggy Simpson standing at her door catching the hail stones in her hand'. Gerard