

Always take the weather with you

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Walking 'round the room singing Stormy Weather

At fifty-seven Mount Pleasant Street

Well it's the same room, but everything's different

You can fight the sleep, but not the dream

Everywhere you go, always take the weather with you

Everywhere you go, always take the weather.

'Weather with you', Crowded House, 1992

Lately, the weather has been front-page news. In the UK, we've just experienced one of the warmest and wettest winters on record. The highest rainfall ever recorded in 24h fell on Cumbria (341.1mm, 5 December) and, belying their commonplace names, storms *Desmond*, *Eva* and *Frank* left a trail of devastation across the north. Birds are nesting early, and spring flowers are blossoming out of turn. The strongest El Niño event ever has resulted in droughts in California and South Africa, and forest fires smouldering across Indonesia. Hard on the heels of the COP 21 climate change conference in Paris, it's no wonder that people are looking at the sky and wondering how much of this is down to human activity and worrying about our long-term forecasts.

As someone who has only recently moved back to England after two decades of living with the very different weather patterns of northern India, I've been fascinated by how our lives and our temperaments are shaped by the climate. The English are forever talking about the weather; it's almost our national characteristic. As Samuel Johnson put it, back in 1758, 'When two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather.'

For the architects of Empire, the weather was key: it was the making of man. According to the *Wonderful World of Knowledge* encyclopedia (Ogan, 1933) 'Climate has a great deal to do with character'. It dubs the tribal peoples of the Amazon 'the pampered darlings of our great Mother Earth':

The land around them is rich, and there is plenty of rain and warmth to make things grow all the year round... As one writer humorously puts it, 'the natives lie flat on their backs and the bananas drop into their mouths'. So, like all spoiled children, they cannot do anything for themselves. Since they do not need to work or plan for a living, they never have learned how to work or plan for anything else... They are still savages because of their climate.

By contrast, the brisk and bracing Northern European is 'a talented animal' whose natural superiority is due to the 'exciting variety' of his changeable climate. 'He will invent hard games and delve into all branches of knowledge; he will swim the seas and climb the mountains and fly to the end of the earth. And all this will be, to a great extent, due to the influence of the weather.'

But enough meteorological eugenic poppycock. The British are also obsessed with the weather forecast – and weather forecasters. TV weatherman John Kettleby admitted in a BBC Radio 4 interview recently that he and many of his fellow presenters would get 'items of clothing' sent to them from fans 'Not knickers, that sort of thing, but sweaters...' he clarified hastily. Kettleby, John Hammond, Michael Fish and their ilk are viewed almost like members of the family, who appear every evening in the living rooms of millions of homes, with their patterned ties and reassuring predictions that occasionally even turn out to be right.

These little islands are chock full of landlubbers who wouldn't know 'a freighter from a futtock', as journalist Philip Reeves (2013) puts it, and yet who harbour an intense and irrational love of the shipping forecast. This daily round-up of weather conditions on the seas around Great Britain has been broadcast across the country for over a hundred years, with only three interruptions: during the two World Wars and once, on 20 May 2014, due to a technical glitch at the BBC (the latter provoking an outcry almost severe enough to have set off World War III).

In his book, *And Now the Shipping Forecast*, Peter Jefferson – who read the forecast for 40 years until 2009 – tries to account for its appeal: 'There is something in many of us

that likes the certainties of life and is averse to change, (Jefferson, 2011). The regularity of the forecast, the hypnotic, almost nursery-rhyme like incantation of 'Dogger, Fisher, German Bight' and the unbroken audio link through the years and back to our childhoods – and even further back to our parents' childhoods and perhaps even their parents' childhoods – offers soothing reassurance that, though the rough winds may rage upon the seas that surround us, we little islanders are calm and safe, in our pyjamas and tucked up in bed. In the words of poet Carol Ann Duffy (1993):

Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer
— Rockall, Malin. *Dogger. Finisterre.*

Talking about the weather also means not saying anything about anything at all – it's just inconsequential chitchat. Which is odd, really, because as botanist, naturalist and compulsive list-maker Simon Leach (pers. commun.) points out, 'The weather is the context that we all have to live within: it's the backdrop to everything we do, and an important factor influencing whether or not we enjoy what we're doing.'

The weather tree keeper

Simon is kneeling down in his living room, showing me the weather trees that he has made. These are posters, a little larger than A1, showing the outline of a tree with twelve branches, one for each month of the year, and there are leaves on each branch, each representing a day. There are 19 of them, one for every year since 1997 (Figure 1). There's a key in one corner, but no fixed rules about what colour scheme you should use. 'Most people that I know who keep weather trees use blue for rain, whereas I tend to use blue for snow because I associate blue with cold. Rain is green because it's the rain that makes the grass grow!' he explains. Starting with January in the bottom left, the tree's plain white leaves accrue their colours clockwise as, every day, before brushing his teeth and going to bed, Simon takes out his special pencils (used only and specifically for this purpose) and colours in a leaf.

The section nearest the petiole, the leaf stalk, is the early part of the day, and the

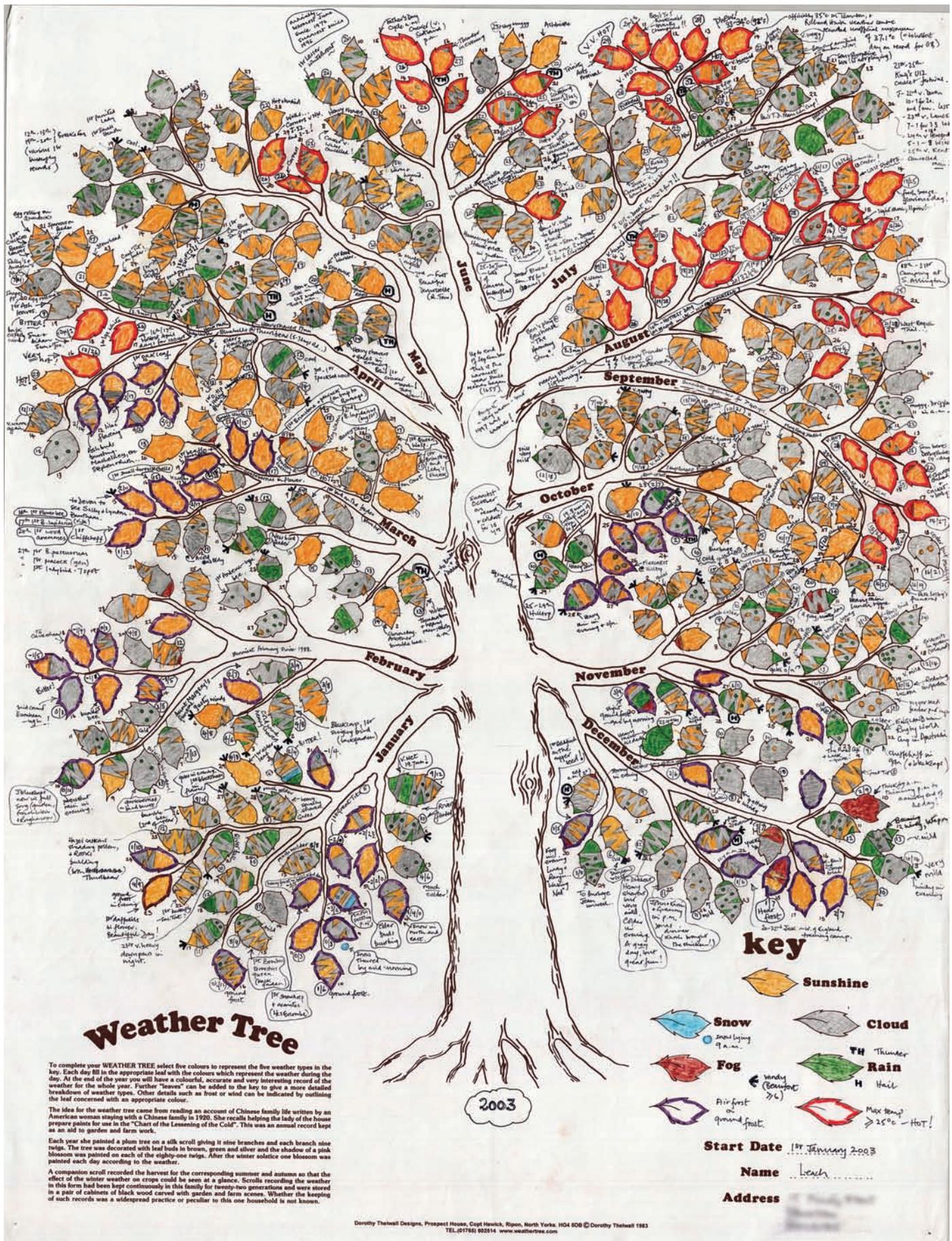


Figure 1. 2003 weather tree. (Source: Simon Leach.)

weather wherever she happened to be. 'One year, she went to Malawi for a couple of months in the autumn, so she had what would have been, in my colour scheme, yellow leaves with red outlines all through October and November'. He wonders briefly what an Indian weather tree would look like – not just more reds and yellows, but the leaves far more uniform than his variegated English foliage, with its telltale zigzags of sunshine and showers.

What the trees don't really tell you about is climate change: they represent too small and too personal a dataset. 'What would be really fascinating is if somebody had done this a hundred years ago for twenty years, and you could compare one forest of trees with another forest 100 years hence, he enthuses. I suppose my hope would be that somebody will do something like this in a hundred years' time and then you could put the two sets together and begin to get a sense of how the climate must have changed between those two time periods.'

One leaf at a time

The weather trees being filled in by Simon Leach were created by naturalist and artist Dorothy Thelwall. A little more than thirty years ago she came across a book by an American woman who travelled through rural China in the 1920s. In it, the author – Nora Waln – describes a *Chart of the Lessening of the Cold* that was used to record the changing of the seasons and helped in planning and managing planting, harvesting and general farm work.

At its simplest, this consisted of eighty-one circles, in groups of nine, each circle subdivided into four, with a small circle in the middle like a target. The circles were then shaded to indicate whether the weather had been cloudy (top) or fair (bottom), windy (left) or rainy (right) or if it had snowed (bull's eye). But just as the modern weather tree has evolved from scientific table to work of art, so too the Chinese chart had its more decorative form: 'The more highly educated, with some skill with the brush, trace a decorative design of a branch of prunus (plum) with eighty-one five-petalled blossoms. One of these is tinted each day in imitation of a tablet at Si An... [that] shows an engraved vase holding a nine-branched tree of plum, each bearing nine flowers.' (Waln, 1934).

Inspired by Waln's account, Dorothy Thelwall's first weather trees were hand-drawn for her own children. 'She filled it in every day until she passed away in 2013'; her daughter Sarah tells me. In the early 1980s, she decided to sell her blank weather trees commercially, initially through the National Trust, and then through her website (<http://www.weathertree.com>). Her husband, David, tells me he still sends out between 500 and 700 weather trees a year – especially around

Christmas time. 'Grandparents like to buy them as gifts for their kids; we get a lot of orders from schools, too'. As one of their longest-standing customers, Simon Leach also originally started a tree as something that his young sons would do – but it rapidly became 'dad's thing'.

Perhaps recognising that her target audience tended to be adults rather than children, Dorothy branched out (as it were), suggesting that her *One-Day-At-A-Time* trees could be used for all sorts of things: from weight loss (*Chart of the Lessening of the Girth*, perhaps?) to recovery from bereavement, amount of exercise taken, daily profit in a small business, eggs laid by hens, time spent practising an instrument, or to record the ups and downs of quitting smoking.

The appeal of weather trees is similar to that of adult colouring books – an entire genre that has suddenly mushroomed in the past few years. It's artistic, but you don't have to be 'arty'. It's resolutely low-tech and offline, reconnecting you to the 'real world'. It's meditative and mindful, demanding focus and attention to detail. Perhaps all the grown-ups who buy weather trees for their kids hope that, by linking an activity to observation, it will sharpen children's awareness of the natural world. Cocooned inside our centrally heated or air-conditioned little boxes, the daily ups and downs of the weather have relatively little effect on what we do, how we dress or what we eat. The trees on the back of the door, or tacked up on the wall, remind us of the ones in the park that we used to climb as children and yearn for our children to do so again.

'The Chinese count wood as the fifth element,' writes Roger Deakin, 'and Jung considered trees an archetype. Nothing can compete with these larger-than-life organisms for signalling the changes in the natural world. They are our barometers of the weather and the changing seasons.' *We tell the time of year by them* (Deakin, 2007). Weather trees, like those coloured in by Simon Leach and his tribe, remind us to look up, to look away from our screens and go outside, if only for the sole purpose of coming back inside and reaching for our colouring pencils.

Simon Leach also points out that while weather trees are not strictly speaking very scientific, they do provide a corrective to people's often inaccurate *perceptions* of the weather.

'When people grumble, 'We haven't had a summer this year' or 'It's been raining non-stop for weeks'; I've got the evidence that it has not been like that, that we did indeed have a summer. It's just that people forget; and when they recall what the weather was like, they're prone to paint a much blacker picture than it really was'.

The weather really does affect how you feel. We tend to use the same terms for

our emotional weather as we do for the stuff that's going on outside, describing someone as having a 'gloomy' or 'sunny' disposition, feeling 'under the weather' and going around 'under a cloud'. Finding in the weather the echo of our internal state of mind: 'Il pleut dans la ville comme il pleut dans mon coeur', that sort of thing. Or, as Crowded House sang, 'Everywhere you go, always take the weather with you'.

But it's not just how you feel: the weather affects how you think. Although you might suppose that sunny days would make you brighter, the opposite appears to be true. In an experiment on shoppers in Sydney, Australia, researchers discovered that bad weather actually sharpens the mind. Shown and asked to recall a tray full of random trinkets, shoppers exhibited markedly better mental acuity on dull rainy days than when it was sunny. Social psychologist Adam Alter, who describes the results in his book *Drunk Tank Pink* (Alter, 2013), puts it down to the fact that 'humans are biologically predisposed to avoid sadness... they respond to sad moods by seeking opportunities for mood repair... In contrast, happiness sends a signal that everything is fine, the environment doesn't pose an imminent threat, and there's no need to think deeply and carefully'. The spotless mind, it appears, really is one of eternal sunshine.

Back in his house in Taunton, Simon Leach brings out a curious old-fashioned contraption in a glass-sided box. At one end is a coil of flattened metal connected by a series of levers and spindles to a large brass drum at the other. A thin steel arm, tipped with an



Figure 5. Simon Leach with his mother's barograph. (Source: Anita Roy.)

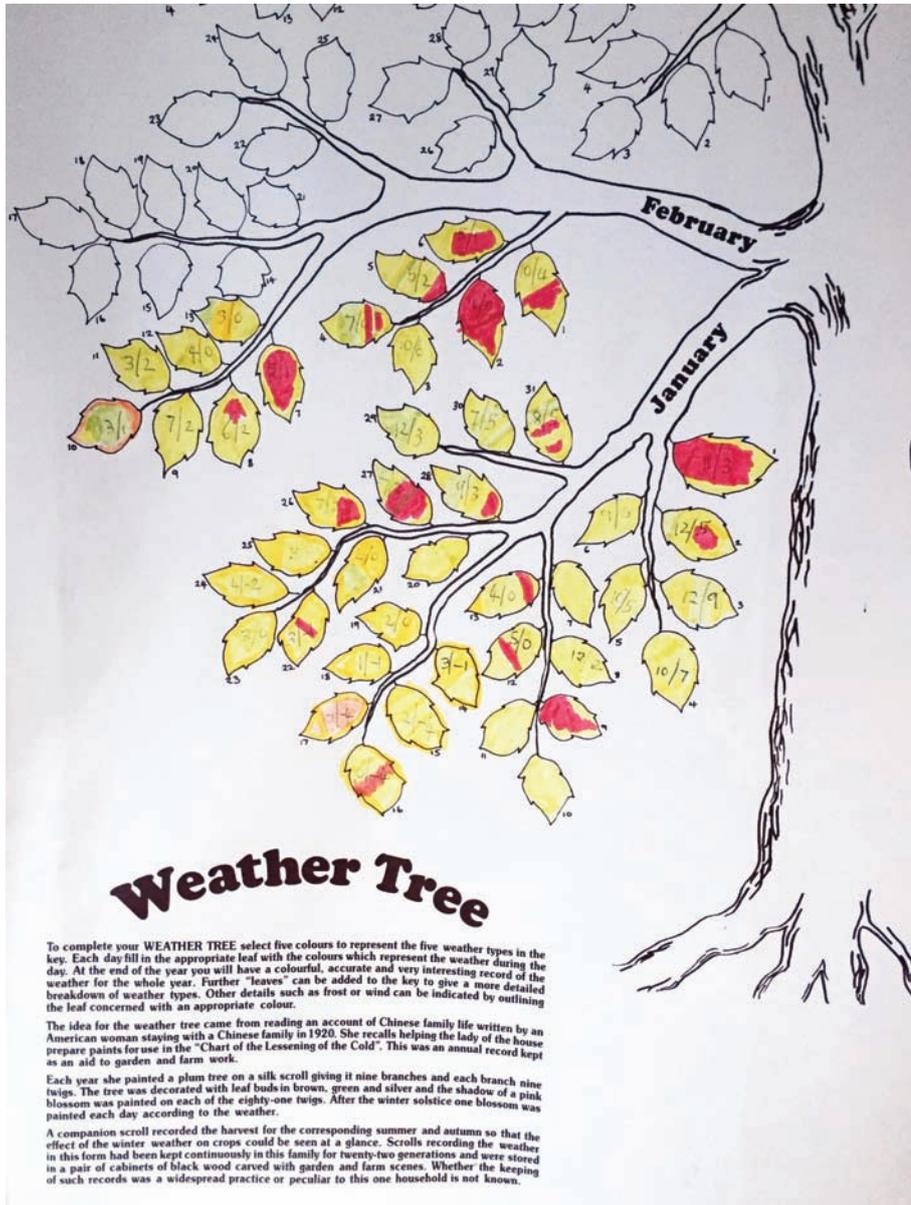


Figure 6. Dorothy Thelwall's original weather tree, 2013. (Source: Sarah Thelwall.)

ink-fed needle, leaves a trail on the graph paper wrapped around the drum (Figure 5).

'It's a barograph,' he explains. 'It belonged to my mum. Records atmospheric pressure.' He pulls on a little wooden knob at the front, and out slides a drawer, cunningly concealed in the base. It is full of weekly

charts, each carefully dated in his mother's handwriting. The one on the drum is for the week beginning 6 November 1963. 'That was just before my eighth birthday – same vintage as the Ladybird books.'

On his weather tree of 2014, the leaf for 2 December is marked with a rather special

annotation: his mother's birthday. 'She died in 1979,' he says, looking at the leaf. *In 2014 she would have been 100.*

The weather tree in the Thelwall family home remains incomplete. 'The 2013 poster stopped being filled in the day Mum died. I see it as the moment the clock stopped,' says her daughter (Figure 6).

The weather tree reminds us of days gone by, of loved ones lost, but perhaps most importantly of something we keep forgetting: that life's barometer is always set to 'change', and that our own season on earth is also brief.

Acknowledgements

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