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Nice Weather for the Time of Year: The British Obsession with the Weather¹

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When, on a summer evening, the melodious sky growls like a tawny lion, and everyone is complaining of the storm, it is the Méséglise way that makes me stand alone in ecstasy, inhaling, through the noise of the falling rain, the lingering scent of invisible lilacs.

(Proust 1983)

Introduction

The British are notorious for their casual interest in the weather. Indeed, a parody of a national stereotype of the British is a portrayal of a person who is very reserved, yet who can happily chat about the weather with strangers.

The weather is a safe topic of conversation because we can discuss it while avoiding sensitive or personal matters. There is more to the weather as a conversational topic than safety, however: the British person's interest in the weather is not without good reason. Britain's weather is particularly fascinating because it is so variable and unpredictable throughout the year. These features are a consequence of its position: it is an island, on the edge of a continent, and its weather is profoundly influenced by the Gulf Stream. The most important consequence of the Gulf Stream is that Britain's climate is much more mild than that of most locations at the same latitude (e.g. it is meteorologically remarkable that Britain is on the same line of latitude as Hudson Bay). Furthermore, because of its position at the edge of a continent, it is often a battleground between maritime and continental air masses. The mild westerlies usually win, but when the continental mass dominates we often see spells of exceptional weather. Severe weather events are still discussed decades later (e.g. the winter, spring, and summer² of 1947, the Lynemouth flood of August 1952, the Great London Smog of December 1952, the North Sea floods of winter 1953, the Great Freeze of 1962–63, the Hampstead Storm of August 1975, and the exceptional summer heat and drought of 1976 are among those often talked about more than a quarter of a century later; see Eden 1995, for descriptions of these events).

In this chapter, I examine in detail what British people talk about when they talk about the weather. Although people have surprisingly strong memories of the weather, these memories are not always correct, and I will consider some reasons why these faulty memories occur. I will also argue that the weather occasionally plays a role in organizing autobiographical memory.

What do People Talk about when they talk about the Weather?

Several characteristics of the weather make it an interesting, frequent, and safe conversational topic. These characteristics include its unpredictability, variability, environmental prominence and importance, and impersonal nature. Yet for many British people, the weather is more than a casual topic to discuss with strangers: it borders on an obsession.

Examination of the British weather newsgroup, *uk.sci.weather*, which is among the most active in the world (indeed, it is probably the most active), provides evidence for this claim. Each day may see hundreds of messages about the weather. But what do people talk about when they talk about the weather? What are British ‘weatherphiles’ most interested in?

I collected data to answer these questions in two ways. First, *uk.sci.weather* is an active and unmoderated newsgroup devoted to the British weather. The newsgroup is open to anyone who can access the *uk.sci* newsgroups. Although some of the contributors are professional meteorologists, most are not. There is some technical discussion, but many postings reflect items of current popular interest in the weather. I saved a random sample (the content determined by throwing a die) of all messages from fifteen days’ worth of postings to the newsgroup. The sample contained nearly 2000 messages.

Second, I run a website devoted to the British weather which emphasizes severe weather events (<http://www.personal.dundee.ac.uk/~taharley/britweather.htm>). I often receive emails about the weather from people who have accessed my site. I stored all weather-related emails for five months (October 2001 to February 2002), and analyzed their content. The sample contained almost 200 messages.

Collecting data from the Internet involves special methodological problems. There are three problems of particular importance. First, in the case of both emails and newsgroups, it is difficult to uncover much meaningful personal information about the newsgroup posters and email correspondents because so many people use a handle rather than a name, and because people do not supply personal information in these settings. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw a few provisional conclusions. First, in the public newsgroup, the great majority of contributors are male (probably in excess of 95 percent), but in my private emails, the distribution is more evenly balanced (with about 60–70 percent being male). Furthermore, and

unsurprisingly given that the topic of the newsgroup is the British weather, the vast majority of contributors are British, although again the bias is less pronounced in my private emails (with most of the difference being made up from people from North America asking about the Scottish weather in the light of a possible vacation). There is clearly a geographical bias to both contributors and correspondents, with more coming from the southeast of Britain, where the population density is highest. It is also difficult to say much about the ethnic origins of the contributors, although examination of the non-handle names suggest that most are Caucasian. It is my impression that contributors are on average older than the population of computer users as a whole. It is similarly difficult to say much about the educational level and social class of the samples, except to say that clearly both presume at least a rudimentary level of computer literacy. One might speculate that given that the name of the newsgroup includes 'science', contributors will probably have a higher level of education in general, and in science in particular, than people in the population at large, or even than people in the sample of private correspondents. This speculation is consistent with the tone of the messages.

The second methodological problem is that the Internet is a dynamic system. In particular, it is an interactive system with feedback. People's beliefs and interests are shaped by what they read on it; this shaping process in turn influences what they write, which goes on to influence what others believe and write, and so on. The newsgroup generates its own issues (which are occasionally picked up on by the press and form the basis of newspaper articles – an illustration that it is possible to jump outside the system). At least some of the readers of the weather newsgroup may come to believe that the newsgroup is in some sense definitive and authoritative (which, if the reader applies caution and reads many posts on a topic, it can be).

On a related matter, the third problem is that in some cases the contributor may be posting a contribution that violates one or more of Grice's (1975) maxims: it may be more or less informative than necessary, it may not be true, it may not be relevant, and it may be obscure, ambiguous, or in some other way difficult to follow. There are few opportunities to assess the formal credentials of contributors, so some casual readers may come away with incorrect beliefs.

Consideration of these problems suggests that some caution is necessary when drawing conclusions about people's understanding of the weather based on observational data collected from the Internet. The sample of contributors is unlikely to be representative of the population as a whole, the Internet is a dynamic system, and some contributions may be in some way faulty. On the other hand, there are reasons for supposing that we should not place too much store on these problems. The newsgroup is to some extent a self-correcting system: errors are rapidly – and often strongly – pointed out by other contributors; pseudo-scientific beliefs are criticized (or even ridiculed); and in general all but the most casual reader is likely to get a more up-to-date and accurate picture of the current status of theorization

about the weather, and a more accurate rendition of the facts, than from many outlets of the media.

Naturally discussion on the weather newsgroup is more wide-ranging than the content of my private emails, although similar main themes emerge from both data sources. The first common theme is speculation about what the weather is going to be like in the near future. The second common theme is related to the first: there is an obsession with extreme weather events. This obsession takes the form of discussion about whether severe weather is likely, how severe it is going to be, and who will be affected by it and for how long. I discuss this particular obsession in more detail below. The third common theme is the presence of reminiscences of past weather events.

Hardly surprisingly, given the supposedly science-based nature of the newsgroup, questions about the physical mechanisms involved in producing the weather are prominent on it. Geographical comparisons are also frequent: how much colder or wetter (or warmer or drier) is one place than another (with occasional discussion of comparisons of pressure and humidity). Reports of comparisons of weather records across time are also frequent. It is strikingly obvious that we are particularly obsessed with weather extremes, and the setting of new records (highest and lowest daily and monthly temperatures, rainfall, and pressure). Fortunately, my sample spanned the setting of one particularly striking record: October 2001 was the warmest ever recorded in Britain. ('Ever recorded' means in the Central England Temperature (CET) series.)³ Other unusual atmospheric phenomena excite much discussion (and envy from those who missed them): in the recent past, these have included noctilucent clouds, haloes and arcs, persistent and bright rainbows, meteors, and particularly aurora. In all of these cases, rapid access to information generates excitement and indeed awareness in readers: they may be more likely to go out and look for and measure these phenomena. There are instances of people becoming weather observers, and purchasing observing equipment, on the basis of Internet exchanges – thus providing new sources of data for the newsgroup to discuss (which is an example of positive feedback in the Internet, as discussed above).

Naturally there has also been much discussion of the causes of extreme weather events (or lack of them): do they arise from chance variation, natural climatic change, or man-induced global warming? Although the bulk of the correspondents find the data cited as supporting the global warming hypothesis overwhelmingly convincing, there is some scepticism, and a few antagonistic contributors, and this topic provokes perhaps the most acerbic debates and exchanges.

My personal emails largely reflect these general topics, although two additional types of communication dominate the emails that are not mirrored in the newsgroup. The first type is a request for information about what the weather was like on a particular day in the past, and the second type a request for speculation on

what it will be like on a particular day in the future. People do not always give reasons for their interest, but the reasons for requests for past weather information are more heterogeneous than those for the future, which are dominated by weddings and holidays (in addition to optimistic desires for extreme weather). Reasons for asking about past weather include: insurance claims, completing school projects, finding out for an elderly relative, identifying the time and place of weather events (I return to this below), and a surprisingly large number of domestic disputes about the weather. For example, LS wrote: 'I was trying to find out what the weather was like between 16 and 21 August 2000. This is to settle an argument I had with my husband on when it actually rained and when his things got wet in the yard.'

Another common question concerned the date of England's last White Christmas. Many correspondents clearly do not realize how local weather phenomena such as snow can be, or that the notion of a White Christmas is quite a vague one, with a number of possible definitions. In the newsgroup, there is often discussion about what really constitutes a 'White Christmas': for bookmakers, it is usually a single flake of snow falling at the meteorological recording site of the appropriate town – in London, it is the roof of the London Weather Centre. Unsurprisingly, this definition is not adequate for most people. Instead, for many a White Christmas means a significant snowfall on Christmas Day – something that has in fact not happened in lowland Britain since 1970! Others are just satisfied with the presence of extensive snow cover. Such matters are obviously a source of discussion – and yet again argument – at home: AP wrote to me saying, 'you will settle a battle between myself and my partner if you can answer this question!'

Another frequent inquiry concerns the best place to live in Britain to get or avoid certain types of weather. People are perhaps surprisingly prepared to move to get certain types of weather. Not surprisingly, elderly people generally want to retire to somewhere sunny, warm, and dry. It is surprising, however, how frequently younger people want to live somewhere where there is a particular type of weather. The most striking example is living somewhere to either avoid or maximize the likelihood of experiencing thunderstorms. Discussion of thunderstorms is very popular in summer on newsgroup, mirroring winter interest in snow, although outside on the newsgroup thunderstorms are widely disliked.

I received numerous requests about measuring and observing the weather. I run my own amateur weather station, and the details of my station are published on my website. These details clearly prompt questions from people keen to begin their own observations. Questions about amateur automatic weather stations are particularly frequent.⁴

In stark contrast to the level of casual interest, most people who have not studied the subject know relatively little about the weather, forecasting, observing, or how the weather works. This is very apparent in that the less knowledgeable people tend to have greater faith in long-range forecasting.

Finally, I received a surprisingly large number of requests asking me to supply data about particular weather events because they were of personal significance. I will discuss this in more detail later.

The Obsession with Severe Weather

In autumn and winter months, the obsession with severe weather takes the form of speculating about and expressing a wish for a severe winter. As a result of the dominant westerlies, severe winters are unusual in Britain; the last truly exceptional winter was 1962–63, and the last exceptionally cold winter months were February 1986 (with a Central England Temperature average of -1.1C^5) and January 1987 (CET $+0.8\text{C}$). Snow in lowland Britain has recently been a rare event; although there have been occasional and locally severe wintry outbreaks, the last time snow covered more than 50 percent of the country was for a short spell in February 1991. Nevertheless, it is rare for a day to pass in winter without someone commenting upon the prospects of severe winter weather based on analysis of the latest long-range or medium-range forecast. Daily updates of forecasts for the two weeks ahead are now freely available on the Internet, and each day these are scrutinized for signs of severe winter weather. Model forecasts are compared and the slightest hints of a change to extreme cold and snowy weather are discussed at length.

My survey period covered the winter of 2001–2. Earlier in the autumn of 2001, there were a number of long-range forecasts that predicted an exceptionally severe forthcoming winter, perhaps akin to that of 1947,⁶ with extreme cold setting in from mid-January. It should be said that the more scientific members of the newsgroup, or those with more meteorological experience, do not always hold these long-range forecasts (often made by amateurs) in high esteem. The more scientific members criticize many of these long-range forecasters for failing to provide and discuss their methods, and for not providing verification data. Global warming and long-range forecasts generated the only really vituperative and personal debates. Nevertheless, the forecasts generated a state verging on what can best be described as near hysteria in much of the readership. Sadly, however, the sceptics were right, and winter 2001–2 turned out to be an unremarkable one in Britain – being mild and wet, particularly in the second half.

The interest in severe winter weather peaked before Christmas: in addition to the interest in severe weather, there was a secondary obsession with having a ‘traditional’ White Christmas. I return to the topic of a White Christmas below.

Nostalgia: ‘the Weather isn’t what it used to Be’

Nostalgia, meaning ‘the pain that people feel when they are no longer in their native land’, was first described by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in the later seventeenth century. Hofer observed the condition of nostalgia in young soldiers who had little hope in returning to their homelands. He noted that affected people became ‘sad and taciturn, listless, solitary, full of sighs and moans, and neither medicaments or argument nor promises nor threats’ helped to make afflicted people any better. Napoleon’s military surgeon, Dominique Larrey, observed that soldiers affected by nostalgia during the retreat from Moscow would recall their homes and villages as ‘being delightful and enchanting, no matter how rude and poverty-stricken they may be’.⁷ The past is seen through rose-colored spectacles, and this saw is also true of people’s memory of the weather. It is clear from my data that nostalgia plays an important role in people’s interest in the weather. But it is a curious sort of nostalgia, because the events that give rise to it are relatively rare.

Perhaps the best example of nostalgia, in both sources of data, is that correspondents generally expressed a strong desire for a White Christmas. There is much nostalgic talk of snow in childhood and White Christmases of the past. However, snow around Christmas is rare in lowland Britain (occurring in fewer than one in ten years), so where does this obsession come from? It should be noted that a desire for snow at Christmas is widespread, and not restricted to weatherphiles; people who would curse heavy snow and the disruption it brings at any other time of year express a desire for it at Christmas. (This desire is even reflected in a change in tone of the BBC weather forecasts around this time.) Doubtless there are many reasons for this obsession, including nostalgia, mass hysteria, and specific prompts such as Hollywood films, memories of a *Christmas Carol*, and the description of Christmas in Charles Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers* (which was probably based on the winter of 1830). Statistically, this expectation of a snowy Christmas Day is totally wrong: the most likely weather for Christmas Day in lowland Britain is cold, dry, and sunny. Indeed, many of the younger contributors will never have experienced a severe winter or an instance of the White Christmas for which they yearn! Instead of individual memories, the drive seems to be a collective nostalgia for how people think things used to or should be. Extrapolating from my own case, and discussions with others, there is also a yearning for an idealized experience: the perfect Christmas is white.

In addition to nostalgia for a White Christmas, there is also marked nostalgia for ‘real winters’. Table 6.1 shows the top ten coldest winters of the twentieth century in Britain.

Table 6.1 shows a marked absence of recent cold winters: the most recent was 1985. Furthermore, let us consider the distribution of severe winters, defined by two criteria. The first criterion is that of severe months with an average temperature

Table 6.1 The top ten coldest winters of the twentieth century in Britain.

<i>Years</i>	<i>Mean temperature C</i>
1962–63	–0.3
1946–47	1.1
1939–40	1.5
1916–17	1.5
1978–79	1.6
1928–29	1.7
1941–42	2.2
1940–41	2.6
1981–82	2.6
1984–85	2.7

less than 2.0C. In the first half of the century, there were 14 severe months, and two occasions (January and February in 1917 and 1929) when there were consecutive severe months. In the second half, there were actually a few more, seeing 17 severe months, with two occasions (1963 and 1979) when there were two consecutive severe months, and only one occasion with three consecutive severe months (1916–17).⁸ This difference, however, will be statistically insignificant. Second, I define exceptionally severe months as those with average temperature beneath freezing. In the first half of the century, there were only two very severe months (January 1940 and February 1947). In the second half, there were five (February 1956, January 1963, February 1963, January 1979, and February 1986; and December 1981 came very close).

In spite of the data, there is a perception that ‘winters are not what they used to be’, and this perception is one drive behind the nostalgia. In spite of the absence of very recent severe winters, in general this belief does not have a very strong foundation (although the basis is stronger than the belief that summers are not what they used to be). For example, there were more exceptionally severe winter months in the second half of the twentieth century than in the first. Where therefore does the belief come from? First, older people’s memories are distorted by the exceptionally severe winters of 1947 and 1962–63, in particular. Second, and perhaps most importantly, I think the recency effect where there have not been many severe winter episodes in the last few years has had a profound influence. Consider Table 6.2, which shows the distribution of the number of severe winter months across the decades of the twentieth century:

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Table 6.2 The distribution of severe winter months across decades of the twentieth century.

<i>1900s</i>	<i>1910s</i>	<i>1920s</i>	<i>1930s</i>	<i>1940s</i>	<i>1950s</i>	<i>1960s</i>	<i>1970s</i>	<i>1980s</i>	<i>1990s</i>
1	4	2	1	6	4	5	2	5	1

Older people's perceptions might be affected by the bump in the middle of the century (particularly the war years, which were exceptional) and compare those winters with those of the 1990s. There is no overall trend, however: note the scarcity of severe months in the zeroes and thirties. It is also possible that central heating means that we are less sensitive to cold weather when it happens.

Hence the nostalgia for severe winters seems to arise from a nexus of reasons; because severe winter weather is rare, but does occur intermittently, and yet has not done so very recently.

As some recompense for the lack of real winter weather, there is frequent discussion of past severe winter weather. For example, there have been daily postings about the events of each day in the Great Freeze of 1962–63. Such postings doubtless help drive the nostalgia, and particularly help influence the perceptions of what 'winter should be like' in the young.

There has also been considerable discussion of the reverse of severe winters: the consequences of an early spring. Manifestations of this include early bird migration and the early blooming of flowers, particularly daffodils. More humorous discussion has centred on when lawns have first to be mowed in different regions.

In spring and summer the obsession with severe weather is manifested by speculation about a prolonged, hot summer with record-breaking temperatures; the pattern is similar, but interest in severe winters is more pronounced. I think there are several reasons for this emphasis on winter weather, including the fact that statistically we have had several very hot summers in recent years, but have not had cold winters, and presumably, given global warming, this pattern is likely to continue. The lack of real winter weather contrasts with the pattern of recent summers. In recent years Britain has seen several hot summer months (e.g. the reading of 37.1C at Cheltenham on August 3, 1990 was the highest temperature ever recorded under standard conditions in Britain, and the exceptionally hot months of July and August 1995 and August 1997, with August 1995 being the hottest August ever recorded, and the second hottest month of any sort – after July 1983 – were most notable). From late winter and spring onwards, there is discussion about the likelihood of exceptional summer weather, with some desire for prolonged warm, sunny weather, exceptional hot days, and severe thunderstorms. There is also not as prominent a nostalgic core to summer in the way that there is in the form of a White Christmas for winter. There is also more division about what constitutes interesting summer weather, with different people preferring settled long, warm spells, others violent thunderstorms, and others exceptional heat. Many

people of course find hot, humid weather very uncomfortable. (People would also presumably find exceptional cold unpleasant, but perhaps because of its rarity do not remember what it is like!)

There is one particularly interesting nostalgic aspect to summer: the idea commonly held and vocalized by older people in Britain that ‘summers aren’t what they used to be’. However, the hottest summer of the twentieth century was relatively recent: 1976 (which was hottest overall by a considerable margin), and the summers of 1990, 1995, and 1997 were all exceptional. Table 6.3 shows the means for the top ten hottest summers (June, July, and August) of the twentieth century.

Table 6.3 Mean temperatures for the hottest ten summers of the twentieth century.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Mean temperature C</i>
1976	17.8
1995	17.4
1983	17.1
1947	17.0
1933	17.0
1911	17.0
1975	16.9
1997	16.6
1959	16.6
1955	16.5

This list of hot summers is dominated by recent years. Furthermore, consider Table 6.4, which shows the distribution of the number of hot summer months across the decades of the twentieth century.¹⁰ I count as a ‘hot month’ one whose CET is 17.5C or greater.

Table 6.4 The distribution of hot summer months across decades of the twentieth century.

<i>1900s</i>	<i>1910s</i>	<i>1920s</i>	<i>1930s</i>	<i>1940s</i>	<i>1950s</i>	<i>1960s</i>	<i>1970s</i>	<i>1980s</i>	<i>1990s</i>
2	2	2	3	1	2	0	3	3	6

Furthermore, the dates of exceptionally hot months (which I define as 18.5C or hotter) are also dominated by recent years: July 1921, August 1947, August 1975, July 1976, July 1983, July 1995, August 1995, August 1997. (Before the twentieth

century, summers were generally worse. The only very hot month before 1921 was July 1852, with a mean of 18.7C, since records began in 1659.) Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that the belief that summers ‘aren’t what they used to be’ is just wrong.

Hence once again people’s nostalgia for a particular weather event is based upon statistically incorrect data. It is likely that the source of this incorrect belief is a combination of unquestioning subscription to a popularly held myth, and generalization from one or two prominent but unrepresentative examples. Of course, there have been some recent poor summers: 1985–88 was a pretty lean spell, and July and August of 1993 were disappointing. We may also remember counter examples to the average pattern and because of their prominence consider them to be average. I have noticed this tendency in my own weather memories: the 1960s were marked by general cooling and a sequence of poor summers, yet I remember many fine summer days. It is likely that many of them came from one or two relatively fine months (e.g. July 1967 and 1969), or even just occasional fine days. It is also likely that people misidentify the time of weather events (e.g. remembering a sunny spring or autumn day as a hot, sunny summer’s day). It is also well known that people’s memories for personal events can be highly unreliable (e.g. see Baddeley 1999; Loftus 1979). It is of particular note that people’s memory for weather forecasts is usually very poor (Ayton 1988). It is worth noting here that in general, people’s memory for everyday objects is surprisingly bad. For example, people are very poor at recalling features and their locations of coins (Nickerson and Adams 1979). Indeed, the data show that rather than remembering specific instances of everyday objects, people remember an average aggregate; Rosch 1973; Rubin and Kontis 1983; see Harley 2001, for a review). Such averages of exemplars are called *prototypes*, and they have played an important role in theorization throughout cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics. Although I am unaware of any specific research on their application to the weather, it is reasonable to suppose that prototypes should operate in the same way when talking about weather categories (e.g. memory for average months) as they do when considering other natural kind categories. People remember the average tendency, even though the average of many instances may not itself have actually occurred (in the same way that the prototypical bird may not correspond to any particular species of bird). People also remember exceptions, and if all they remember are exceptions, they might come to think of those exceptions as typical.

Remembrance of weather events

One of the most frequent queries in my sample is that a person has a particularly strong memory of some non-weather event, and is trying to discover the weather

that went with it; or has a vivid memory of some weather event, and is trying to date and amplify it. This observation suggests that weather can be a source of important childhood memories, and can even be a component of ‘flashbulb memories’. Indeed, the weather can be the focus of the memory. A flashbulb memory is a particularly vivid memory of what a person was doing at a particular time, often when the person discovers important news, such as hearing about the Kennedy assassination (Brown and Kulik 1977) or the Challenger space shuttle disaster (Bohannon 1988). Some researchers have speculated that strong emotions can lead to the storage of particularly vivid memories, although this idea has proved controversial (e.g. McCloskey et al. 1988). Certainly in my sample, and in my experience, not all vivid memories are associated with moments of heightened emotion.

The observation that people try to discover the weather associated with particular events suggests that the weather provides a *metacognitive role* in organizing memories, in that weather events can provide a framework for searching and dating memories (see Karmiloff-Smith 1986 for a discussion of metacognition). For example, I remember some striking thunderstorms in London that were probably in September 1961 or August 1962 (when I was 3 or 4; these were notably thundery months in the south, and I would be unlikely to remember events any earlier). Even at this age, I clearly remember the light cast by the lightning as being brilliant yellow-white. My father tried to comfort me (I think) by saying that it was the sound of angels banging together; this upset me even more. I can date this memory because of my knowledge of the distribution of severe thunderstorms in the London area in the early 1960s. I also have a clear image of making a snowman in my grandmother’s garden: the snow was thick and white. Again, my knowledge of the weather enables me to date this event to the winter of 1962–1963. These examples show that we can organize memories on the basis of their weather content. Such mnemonic techniques are not restricted to people obsessed with the weather. A correspondent emailed me with memories of violent thunderstorms happening while she was sailing off the Isle of Wight in Hampshire when she was a child. (I was able to provide the date for this event as August 1956.) Much more recently, I remember August 1995 in the Midlands just being hot and sunny all the time. I remember getting off a bus and thinking ‘wow’. This instance shows how fallible memory is, because I do not see how I could have been on a bus then. Once again, this finding echoes that of other memory research: memories might be very clear, but might also have never happened. We may have particularly vivid memories, but the memories might be false (Schachter 1999). Indeed, on the basis of such errors, Neisser (1986) argued that accuracy in vivid memories can be quite poor, and in any case accuracy is not of paramount importance: instead, vivid memories serve a symbolic function. This argument is consistent with my weather data and the literature on the unreliability of eye-witness testimony. We may have

vivid memories of the weather, but they are not always accurately to other events we might remember. Although it may be stretching the point, we might for example remember the weather as being hot and sunny at a time when we were particularly happy, or pouring with rain when we were unhappy. Even if we do not always misremember the weather, we might only remember it if it is consistent with our emotions at the time of encoding.

I note on my website that in memories of my own childhood, all winters were cold and snowy, and all summers hot and sunny. Again, these memories are just wrong – or at least I am remembering a few instances. In particular, as discussed above, British summers in the 1960s (which cover my early childhood years) were cool and wet. The only truly severe winter in my childhood was 1962–63, with a few other cold, snowy months (most notably January 1966 and February 1968 and 1969). People – including me, who should know better – are clearly remembering occasional prototypical events (e.g. one cold winter) and then attributing whole categories to this prototype (e.g. they remember one cold, snowy January and think that all Januarys are like that). This observation suggests that there might be a top-down influence on prototype formation: we do not just aggregate memories, as our beliefs also have an effect on how the prototype is formed. These beliefs, as we saw in the discussion of *White Christmases*, may have a cultural rather than memorial origin.

The idealization seen in our memories of the weather mirrors that shown in other types of nostalgia. Larry's remark about soldiers longing for their home villages, no matter how grim those villages were, might equally be applied to the weather: we long for the weather of our past, no matter how grim or atypical it might have been.

Conclusions

From an analysis of postings to the British weather newsgroup, my personal emails, and my own introspections, it is clear that the weather is much more than just a topic of casual conversation. When people talk about the weather, one of the topics that is discussed most frequently is memory of past extreme weather events. In addition to being a source of memories, at least some of the time weather can provide a framework for accessing and structuring memory. That is, the weather plays a metacognitive role in organizing cognition. People are also nostalgic about past weather events when they have few statistical grounds for doing so. There might be a number of reasons for this nostalgia, about which one can only speculate. The weather is a 'safe' topic for childhood memories, in the same way that it is a safe topic of conversation: it is impersonal. There is an element of idealization and romanticism about the past in which the weather can play a surprisingly central

role. Finally, although people can have vivid memories of past weather events, these memories can often be wrong.

Notes

1. Please send correspondence to Dr Trevor Harley, Psychology Department, University of Dundee, Dundee DD1 4HN, UK, or by email to t.a.harley@dundee.ac.uk.
2. The seasons are defined meteorologically as follows: spring: March, April, May; summer: June, July, August; autumn (fall): September, October, November; winter: December, and January and February of the following year. I follow this usage in this chapter.
3. The Central England Temperature series, abbreviated to CET, provides an estimate of the average temperature of southern and central lowland Britain. The series dates from 1659; the earlier temperature estimates were constructed by Professor Gordon Manley in a paper of exceptional importance – see Manley (1974).
4. See my web pages on my experience of building my own weather station, http://www.personal.dundee.ac.uk/~taharley/my_weather_station_adven.htm.
5. C is an abbreviation for the Celsius temperature scale, used throughout this chapter. To convert degrees Celsius to Fahrenheit, multiply by 1.8 and add 32.
6. In Britain 1947 was probably the most remarkable year, meteorologically speaking, of at least the twentieth century. The winter was generally the snowiest of the century, although, unusually for a severe winter, the prolonged severe weather did not set in until relatively late (20 January); February was the coldest on record; the severe winter persisted well into March, when rapid thawing led to widespread flooding; yet by May 3 the temperature reached 34.4C in the south. The summer was exceptionally hot, sunny, and dry. There was a drought in autumn, and to end the year, there was a thunderstorm on Christmas Day with marble-sized hail (which would be exceptional in Britain in summer).
7. This description of the medical condition of nostalgia comes from a medical column in the *Sunday Telegraph* newspaper by Dr James Le Fanu (2002).
8. Here are the severe months (mean < 2.0C): February 1902, December 1916, January 1917, February 1917, February 1919, January 1929, February 1929, December 1933, January 1940, January 1941, January 1942, February 1942, January 1945, February 1947, December 1950, February 1955, February 1956, December 1962, January 1963, February 1963, February 1968, February 1969,

January 1979, February 1979, December 1981, February 1983, January 1985, February 1986, January 1987, February 1991. Here again are the very severe months (mean < 0C): January 1940, February 1947, February 1956, January 1963, February 1963, January 1979, February 1986.

9. Here are the hot months (mean $\geq 17.5\text{C}$): July 1900, July 1901, July 1911, August 1911, July 1921, July 1923, July 1933, August 1933, July 1934, August 1947, July 1955, August 1955, August 1975, July 1976, August 1976, July 1983, August 1984, July 1989, August 1990, July 1994, July 1995, August 1995, August 1997, July 1999.

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