



The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century (Two Lectures delivered at the London Institution February 4th and 11th, 1884)

John Ruskin

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An excerpt:

Let me first assure my audience that I have no *arrière pensée* in the title chosen for this lecture. I might, indeed, have meant, and it would have been only too like me to mean, any number of things by such a title;-- but, to-night, I mean simply what I have said, and propose to bring to your notice a series of cloud phenomena, which, so far as I can weigh existing evidence, are peculiar to our own times; yet which have not hitherto received any special notice or description from meteorologists.

So far as the existing evidence, I say, of former literature can be interpreted, the storm-cloud--or more accurately plague-cloud, for it is not always stormy--which I am about to describe to you, never was seen but by now living, or lately living eyes. It is not yet twenty years that this--I may well call it, wonderful, cloud has been, in its essence, recognizable. There is no description of it, so far as I have read, by any ancient observer. Neither Homer nor Virgil, neither Aristophanes nor Horace, acknowledge any such clouds among those compelled by Jove. Chaucer has no word of them, nor Dante;[1] Milton none, nor Thomson. In modern times, Scott, Wordsworth and Byron are alike unconscious of them; and the most observant and descriptive of scientific men, De Saussure, is utterly silent concerning them. Taking up the traditions of air from the year before Scott's death, I am able, by my own constant and close observation, to certify you that in the forty following years (1831 to 1871 approximately--for the phenomena in question came on gradually)--no such clouds as these are, and are now often for months without intermission, were ever seen in the skies of England, France, or Italy.

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