Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme

Bassnett, Madeline, project dir. Weather Extremes in England's Little Ice Age, 1500–1700

Clio Doyle

Volume 46, numéro 3-4, été–automne 2023

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110393ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42696

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)
2293-7374 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Doyle, C. (2023). Compte rendu de [Bassnett, Madeline, project dir. Weather Extremes in England's Little Ice Age, 1500–1700]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, *46*(3-4), 505–509. https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42696

Bassnett, Madeline, project dir.
Weather Extremes in England's Little Ice Age, 1500–1700.
London, ON: Western University, 2022–. Accessed 17 August 2023.
weather-extremes-in-englands-little-ice-age-westernu.hub.arcgis.com.

The Weather Extremes in England's Little Ice Age database and mapping application is a work in progress, but it is already providing extremely useful insights into English weather, and ways of writing about English weather, between 1500 and 1700. Project director Madeline Bassnett, project researcher Daryl Wakunick, and site creator Liz Sutherland have compiled a database of extreme weather events. The locations of these events are displayed on a map of contemporary Britain, but the raw data can also be downloaded in KML, GeoJSON, Shapefile, and CSV/Excel. On the map, these extreme events are broken down into 12 colour-coded categories of vastly different sizes, from storms (192 instances) to fire, fog, and thunder (one instance each). The map usefully specifies the name of the historical location, the name of the contemporary location, and whether the location is exact. For example, one pamphlet description of floods drowning cattle simply has as its location "the easterne part of Essex," so the map consequently displays a dot in Essex with the note that this location is not precise. Cold weather reported by the diarist John Evelyn that resulted in damage to his garden is, on the other hand, pinpointed precisely to Deptford.

The title of the database emphasizes the connection between the gathering of this data on extreme weather and the historical phenomenon of the Little Ice Age. This connection is explained in the text that introduces the mapping application on its web page, which is hosted by Western University's Department of English and Writing Studies. This brief introduction highlights the project's importance in providing insights into the Little Ice Age: "Written accounts—both formal and informal—are crucial to documenting weather and climatic patterns prior to the development of weather recording technologies." While this type of gathering of information on weather extremes can certainly help us understand the felt effects of the Little Ice Age and follow its development, this resource by itself, because of its small scope, cannot at this stage allow us to get a picture of the Little Ice Age as a whole. It provides a snapshot of 200 years of extreme weather in one place (more on the geographical boundaries below). This is still extraordinarily useful, of course, and the project can serve as a spur

to further research into other time periods and countries. But this database is unlikely to be the best resource for someone encountering the idea of the Little Ice Age for the first time; it will probably be more useful to researchers who already work on an area related to early modern environmental humanities than to neophytes.

Although the project is ingenious and very well presented, I would have appreciated a little more discussion of its geographical boundaries. The name of the project—"Weather Extremes in England's Little Ice Age"—leads one to expect an England-specific dataset, but there are a few confusing elements. The map technically shows the whole world, but whereas the rest of the world is coloured in beige, Britain (and not just England) is depicted with topographical shading from brown to green. This means that Scotland and the Crown Dependency of the Isle of Man are also coloured in this way, despite being nominally excluded from the data collection. All the dots representing extreme weather events are in fact situated on English soil except for two Scottish data points, both in Edinburgh. The project specifically makes use of English sources, and the focus on just England seems useful in delineating the boundaries of what is clearly a vast and laborious project. I wondered, then, why the research team included Scotland at all, since having two data points in Edinburgh might make it seem (wrongly, perhaps?) that England bore the brunt of weather extremes in this period rather than that the project is simply focusing almost, but not quite, exclusively on England. I think it would be useful to have an explanation laying out what has been taken into account, and what has been ignored, in delimiting the project's geographical boundaries. This goes, too, for the choice to locate these early modern occurrences on a map of present-day Britain, which includes features such as highways and underground stations. A brief discussion of why these choices were made would have been helpful.

The (by and large) English focus means that the resource will probably be most useful to scholars working on English history and literature. And I think it will be very useful, indeed, to such scholars. For example, the project provides filters that allow for the selection of weather events that do or do not have effects on animals, trees and crops, humans, and property, allowing researchers to cut through the data in different ways. A researcher interested in agricultural disasters could search for events that damaged crops and could further opt to select events that also hurt animals but not humans, for example. The data can also be filtered by date, to give an overview of a year's reported extreme weather,

and, usefully, by source, allowing a researcher interested in John Evelyn, for example, to discover how often he talks about extreme cold or rain in his diary.

The database's interface is extremely intuitive and provides an impressive amount of information. An example, drawn from Stephen Batman's *The Doome Warning All Men to the Judgement* (1581), is the freezing of the Thames many years prior, in 1516, represented here as a dot next to Charing Cross station (not, in fact, precisely on the Thames). This dot serves to mark the location of 62 occurrences taking place in London over this period, but the record for the 1516 freeze reads as follows:

> *01/01/1516 – 31/12/1516*
> **Source:** *The Doome Warning All Men to the Judgement*
> **Cross References:** N/A
>
> **Contemporary Location:** London, Greater London, England
> **Historical Location:** London, Middlesex, England
> **Is this a precise location?** Y
>
> **Geographical Features:** The Thames
> **Meteorological Record:** "This yeare was suche a greate froste in Englande, that the River Thames being greatelye frosen, dydde beare Cartes and passengers over from Westminster to Lambeth."
> **Primary Event Type:** Extreme Cold
> **Secondary Event Type**: Frost
>
> *Effects of Events*
> **Animals:** N/A
> **Trees and crops:** N/A
> **Humans:** N/A
> **Built Environments:** N/A
>
> **Act of Providence:** Yes; Batman's chronicle suggests that all natural occurrences are acts of providence.
> **Statements of Rarity:** "greate" "greatelye"
> **Notes:** N/A
> **OED Definitions**: N/A

> **Citation:** Stephen Batman, *The Doome Warning All Men to the Judgement*, 1581, pp. 297–298.

There are some very interesting and useful touches here. The "OED Definitions" category is for the (rare) cases when a record uses a word that the project collaborators deem necessary to define. This is certainly not an essential feature, but it does allow for a seamless experience in which the user does not have to navigate away from the page in order to look something up (assuming, of course, that the compilers have guessed correctly about what the user already knows). The "Statements of Rarity" feature is somewhat subjective but cites the words that seem to mark a weather event as unusual. The "Effects of the Event" are also somewhat subjective but generally seem to mean adverse effects, so that in this case, for example, the ability to cross to Lambeth over the ice is not labelled as having an effect on humans, though it was presumably very convenient.

In general, the citation of a generous helping of the early modern source in question allows users to gauge for themselves what is being said about a particular meteorological event and compare that to how it is described by the keywords. My favourite touch is the specification of whether a weather event is described as an act of providence. This is helpful in identifying possible instances of a source using, embellishing, or even inventing weather events for a religious or political purpose while recognizing that trying to separate out the causality of weather events between the poles of human, divine, or ecological is an anachronistic way of approaching early modern thought.

Overall, the sources found in the database are an intriguing mix of printed pamphlets, chronicles, and records such as diaries, commonplace books, and letters. I think it's a really exciting idea to mine all of these different kinds of writing for descriptions of weather that has been marked out as extreme in some way, allowing us to get a sense of what might have been happening meteorologically—and what seemed out of the ordinary—in this period. This project prompts a lot of thought about how to make use of early modern sources of this kind without discounting their rhetorical uses (and the suspicion that some of them may have been peddling useful fictions rather than, or perhaps *as*, some version of the truth) while also acknowledging that the sources are describing occurrences that fall under the broad umbrella of extreme weather and can therefore be variously connected to the events of the Little Ice Age. I

might not trust the early modern pamphleteers as far as I could throw them, but I trust this resource to represent their potentially misleading words fairly and accurately.

CLIO DOYLE
Queen Mary University of London
https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42696