

The Meaning of Clouds: A phenomenological study

by Ada Blair

This is a qualitative research project in which, over a period of a month, I observed cloud types and patterns and explored how they impacted me. I took a phenomenological approach to creating my sky journal and recorded in text my reflexive considerations on the subject of clouds. The text was amplified with photographs and simple line drawings that illustrate, or have some relationship to, the topic. In order to place my observations into the context of this particular sky feature as a cultural resource, I also considered climactic sky myths, weather lore, cloud divination and examples from art, music, and literature.

Introduction

This essay describes a qualitative research project in which, over a period of a month, I kept a sky journal and used the sky as a primary document to observe cloud types and patterns and explore the impact they had on me. To enable me to place my observations into the context of this particular sky feature as a cultural resource, I consider climactic sky myths, weather lore, cloud divination and examples from art, music, and literature in my discussion. The personal background to my journal is a long-standing sense of awe at the ever-changing patterns and shapes in the clouds and my desire to assign meaning and significance to what I see. Also, I hoped that by observing clouds, I might learn more about cloud classification and meteorology. Literature that informed my thinking includes work by scholars, artists and folklorists and ranges from

Aristophanes comedy, *The Clouds*, written around 423 BCE, to the 21st century Cloud Appreciation Society's blogs.¹

Methodology

I took a phenomenological approach towards the topic and recorded in text in my journal my reflexive considerations on the subject of clouds. The text was amplified with photographs and simple line drawings that illustrate, or have some relationship to, the topic. According to Dermot Moran, the function of phenomenological description is to focus on '...the structure and qualities of objects and situations as they are experienced by the subject.'² Further, Charlotte Aull Davies defines reflexivity as a '...turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference...' - and the style of journal keeping I adopted is intrinsically an experiential, reflexive activity.³

My field notes were handwritten into a notebook and drawings were kept simple to enable the journal to be "accessible" for recording. My iPhone was used for photographs - again, as I find it to be an accessible device. I also used its voicemail facility to "capture" my thoughts when I was outdoors without my journal to widen my researcher perspective. Excerpts from the journal are

¹ Aratus, *Phenomena*, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/AratusPhaenomena.html>; Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aristophanes/clouds.html>; Aristotle, *Meteorology*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/meteorology.html>, [hereafter Aristotle, *Meteorology*]; Cloud Appreciation Society, <http://www.cloudappreciationsociety.org>, [hereafter *Cloud Appreciation*]; Kelly DeLay, <http://www.clouds365.com/blog>, [hereafter DeLay, *Clouds 365*]; Tim Ingold, "Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13 (2007), [hereafter, Ingold, *Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather*]; Richard Inwards, *Weather Lore: A Collection Of Proverbs, Sayings, And Rules Concerning The Weather* (London: W. Tweedie, 1869) [hereafter, Inwards, *Weather Lore*]; T. D. MacDonald, *Gaelic Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings with English Translations* (Stirling: Eneas Mackay, 1926) [hereafter, MacDonald, *Gaelic Proverbs*]; Ovid, "Fasti", *Loeb Classical Library*, trans., James G. Frazer, rev. J.P. Gould (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1989) [hereafter, Ovid, *Fasti*]; William Shakespeare, <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/>; Wilfrid Van Soldt, *Solar omens of Enuma Anu Enlil: Tablets 23(24)-29(30)* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1995) [hereafter, Van Soldt, *Solar Omens*]; Lorena Laura Stookey, *Thematic Guide to World Mythology* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004) [hereafter, Stookey, *World Mythology*]; Mark Williams, "Druids, cloud-divination, and the portents of Antichrist", "<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199571840.001.0001/acprof-9780199571840-chapter-2>", [hereafter Williams, *Druids*].

² Dermot Moran, "Introduction to Phenomenology", http://www.free-ebooks.net/ebook/Introduction-to-Phenomenology/pdf/view_p.2, [hereafter, Moran, *Phenomenology*].

³ Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography, A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London: Routledge, 1999), [hereafter Aull Davies, *Reflexive*], p. 4.

submitted below with photographs and scans of the original handwritten notes and line drawings.

Sky Journal – excerpts from field notes and images

6th May 2013, 1-5 p.m.

Large, puffy clouds against increasingly larger patches of blue sky (see fig. 1). Sun to come? Want to find something to be happy about (my mother died on 7th April). Thinking about phrase “blue sky thinking”. This cloudless blue sky lifts my mood, suggests possibility. Often associate clouds with trouble/low mood. Weighing up likelihood of rain and need to paint shed. Don’t know enough yet about what these clouds indicate, won’t paint today.



Fig. 1. Clouds from garden, 4 p.m.

What do I associate with clouds? Foam, breath, candyfloss, cotton wool, ghosts, froth. Thinking about music, poetry, novels about clouds: The cloud - Shelley, Daffodils - Wordsworth, Cloud atlas - David Mitchell, Get off my cloud - Rolling Stones, Joni Mitchell - Both sides now (clouds).

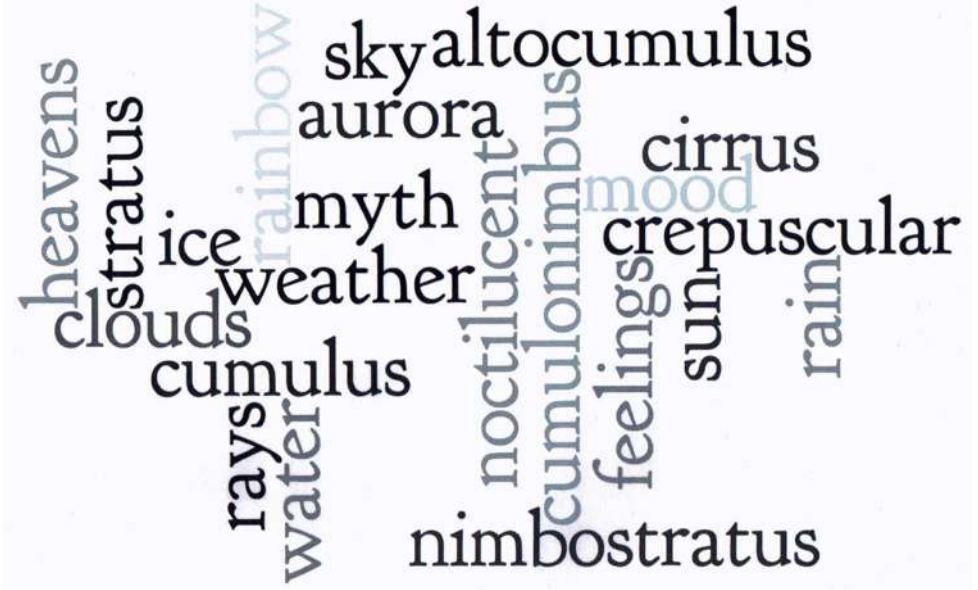


Fig. 2. Cloud “word cloud”.

10th May 2013, 7 a.m.

Light grey sky, no clouds. Aware intensely of garden smells and birdsong. Birds and other animals seem to be able to predict weather. Swifts flying very low. Can I learn to predict weather by smell? Thinking about who lived here before us in this cottage. Mill workers working at the flourmill down the road. What they observed in the sky would have a different importance to them. Rain clouds would have meant swollen river and provided water. What’s my cultural view of clouds? Do they affect my working day?

11th May 2013.

Scattered mum’s ashes today at stone circle near her house. Dark grey skies full of rain clouds making it all even harder to bear. Our tears are like the rain. Some ashes rise into the air, some fall to the ground. Will she become part of the clouds? When it rains will she come back to earth? Druids believed clouds were made of souls, holding this in mind as I cast her ashes.

13th May 2013, 7.45 a.m.

Constable painted over 100 cloud scenes on Hampstead Heath. A true cloud-lover! He called clouds the chief organ of sentiment. Who appreciates clouds in this way today? Dark clouds move quickly against the windy sky (see fig. 3). The birds are frantic, flying back and forth. I'm feeling a sense of foreboding/unease. What's to come?



Fig. 3. Clouds through conservatory roof, 8.20 a.m.

The heavens open, rain pours down. Huge puddles form reflecting the clouds; always the sky is on the earth. Feeling frustrated with my narrow view of the sky from garden, go out onto road to see the whole weather drama unfolding.

14th May 2013, 2.06 p.m.

Wow, Saint Andrews crosses in the sky (see fig. 4)! Wonderful saltires, Alex Salmond (Scotland's First Minister) would love this! Cirrus clouds streaking

across the sky at different altitudes. Pictish king Angus saw a cross like this the day before battle over the Northumbrian Angles. He took it as a good omen. He won the battle.



Fig. 4. Clouds from garden, 2.06 p.m.

16th May 2013, 8.58 a.m.

Thinking about religious images of clouds, paper “scraps” from childhood of cherubs on fluffy clouds, images in my Rohan Book of Hours. These were the clouds I recognised when I was young. “Cloud angel” seen in sky in Florida on day new pope was named. Our brains are so wired up to recognise/seek faces and other humanlike patterns we find them everywhere. Cirrocumulus clouds - deteriorating weather (see fig. 5)? Weather proverbs about mackerels’ scales/mares’ tails.



Fig. 5. Clouds from garden, 8.58 a.m.

17th May 2013, 7.30 a.m.

Rain last night. Long, thin layers of clouds like strips of cotton wool, stratocumulus (see fig. 6)? Boundaries between cloud types constantly changing.



Fig. 6. Clouds from Waverley Bridge, 8.30 a.m.

Have started taking pictures on walk to work, want to see a bigger sky, feel expansive not constricted? Want to notice changing weather fronts and cloud patterns, be more intellectually satisfied?

19th May 2013, 8.30 p.m.

Looking at mythology attached to clouds- Greek, Celtic, etc. They've been important in many cultures. What are my Scottish cloud stories? Sky overcast. An enveloping blanket, no definition between sky and earth. Birdsong seems different when sky's overcast, more plaintive/mournful or am I projecting my emotion onto birds and sky?

20th May 2013, 9.30 p.m.

Overcast sky. Feeling frustrated, sky isn't offering me anything. I want it to perform, produce interesting cloud shapes, entertain. I make my own

entertainment and brainstorm cloud sayings: Have your head in the clouds, have your judgement clouded, every cloud has a silver lining, under a cloud (of suspicion), living in cloud-cuckoo land. We can't use clouds to mark time in way we can with e.g. planets. They can't be appropriated in this way, maybe watching them is aimless? Allows me to relax.

21st May 2013, 9.45 p.m.

Less overcast sky but after watching devastation wrecked by Oklahoma typhoon feel grateful for my boring sky. Interesting that all the storm chasers and weather forecasters didn't see that one coming. The sky can always surprise us.

22nd May 2013, 8.15 a.m.

On walk to work took pictures minutes apart of very different clouds, amazing how quickly they shape-shift (see figs. 7-9).



Fig. 7. Clouds from Old Church Lane, 8.15 a.m.



Fig. 8. Clouds from Old Church Lane, 8.18 a.m.



Fig. 9. Clouds from Queens Drive, 8.38 a.m.

Decided to stop trying to work out what kind of cloud I'm seeing and just enjoy the view. Let my imagination and creative self have free rein and just look and see what I could see. So this is what I saw: 2 fish, a swan, an eagle, a curled cat. Wondering about their relationship to some astrological signs/constellations/archetypes and how the shapes we see in the sky may be determined by our culture/individual interests, etc. (I often see animals or objects from nature).

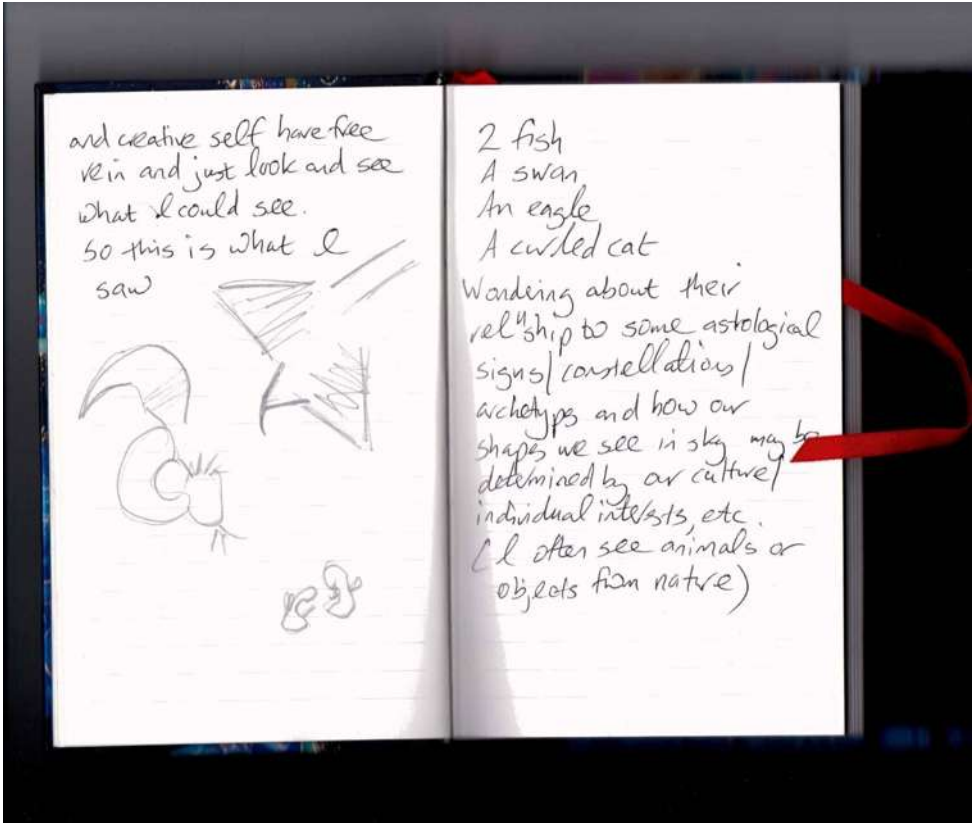


Fig. 10. Scan of sky journal, 22nd May 2013.

25th May 2013.

Today I'll take pictures of full moon. Will the Edinburgh moon appear to me tonight? Just now sky is clear, bright blue. Birds singing heartily and the shepherds will be delighted!

12.45 a.m.

Voice message to self, 'Walking back from dinner at friends' but no sign of moon! Where is she?' Thought of terror Aztecs felt when sun disappeared during eclipse. And then walking through park suddenly there she was! Nestling on Arthur's Seat. Just in time I got pictures - they don't do justice (see fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Full moon from Holyrood Park, 12.45 a.m.

26th May 2013, 6 p.m.

Posted 2 pics from last night on HD Facebook page. Some great ones from other people. Odd that they can all look so different yet it's the same moon and it's connected to us all through our shared observing. Feels like we've participated in a moon conversation, a heavenly discourse. All day clouds have been filling the sky with patches of blue peeping through occasionally – stratocumulus, I think. Blue sky is where "pockets of cold air are beginning to sink" (p. 35 PCB). Book also says they're most common clouds on earth but for me they're still beautiful as they move in a stately motion across the sky.

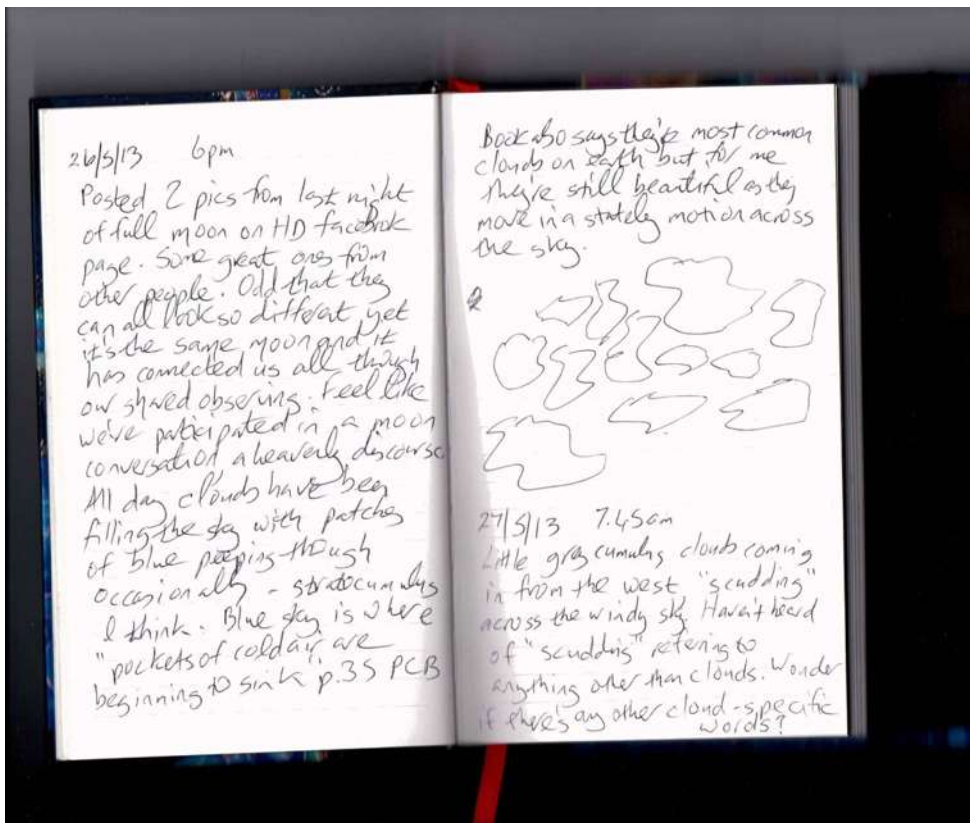


Fig. 12. Scan of sky journal, 26th and 27th May 2013.

27th May 2013, 7.45 a.m.

Little cumulus clouds coming in from the west, scudding across the windy sky. Haven't heard of scudding referring to anything other than clouds, ships or waves. Are there any other cloud-specific words? Love that 'scud' comes from O.E. 'scut' for rabbit's tail. Sometimes they look just like lots of little rabbits scampering about.

28th May 2013, 8.20 a.m.

Layers of stratus nebulosus clouds fill sky, weather moving in from west. Can see how the phrase "feeling under the weather" relates to grey/gloomy skies. Pentland Hills have a cap of clouds (see fig. 13). Difficult to look up and feel inspired or cheered by the sky today.

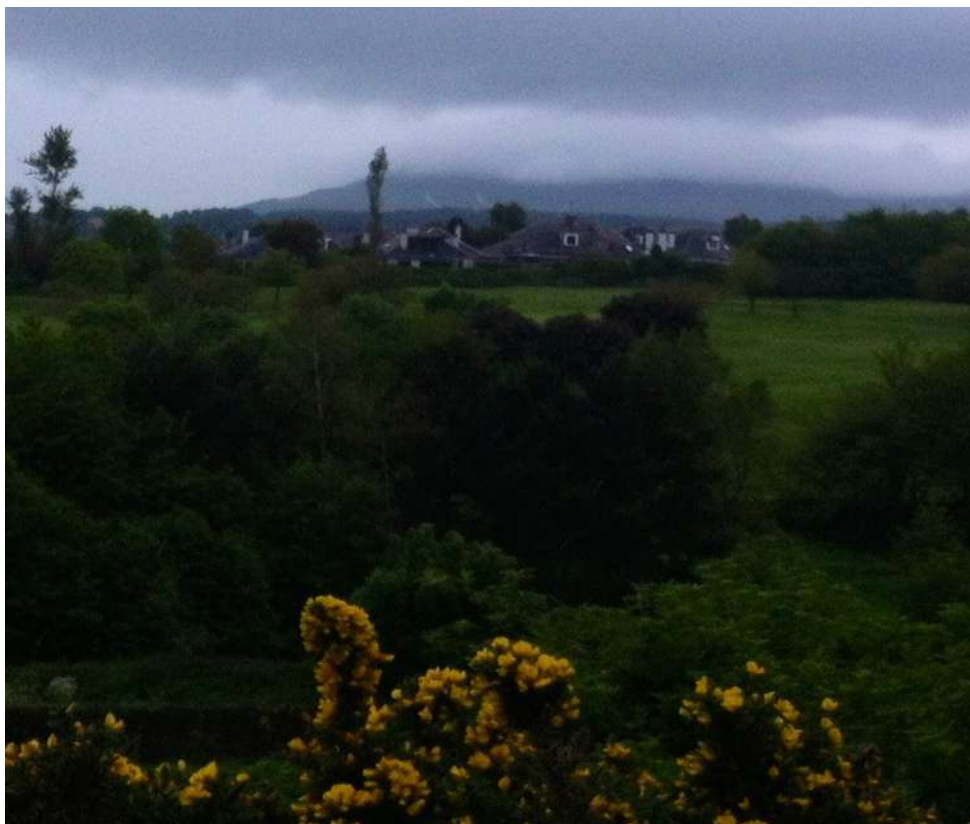


Fig. 13. Pentland Hills with “cap” on from Old Church Lane, 8.20 a.m.

30th May 2013, 6 p.m.

Clouds of all shapes and sizes, constantly morphing and moving. Feeling like the whole universe is dancing and I’m a fixed point on the earth. But the earth is moving, spinning, rotating through space. Stand in wonder watching the skies...

2nd June 2013, 3.30 p. m.

Out walking South Edinburgh – big blue sky and try to take photo of little fluffy cotton wool cumulus clouds when I glance behind me and see another kind of Jacob’s ladder. Sun’s brightness means I can’t get a good photo. Struggle trying to for a minute or so then just gaze at the sky in wonder. Crepuscular rays by any other name? At this moment, “Jacob’s ladder” describes the moment and the image better.

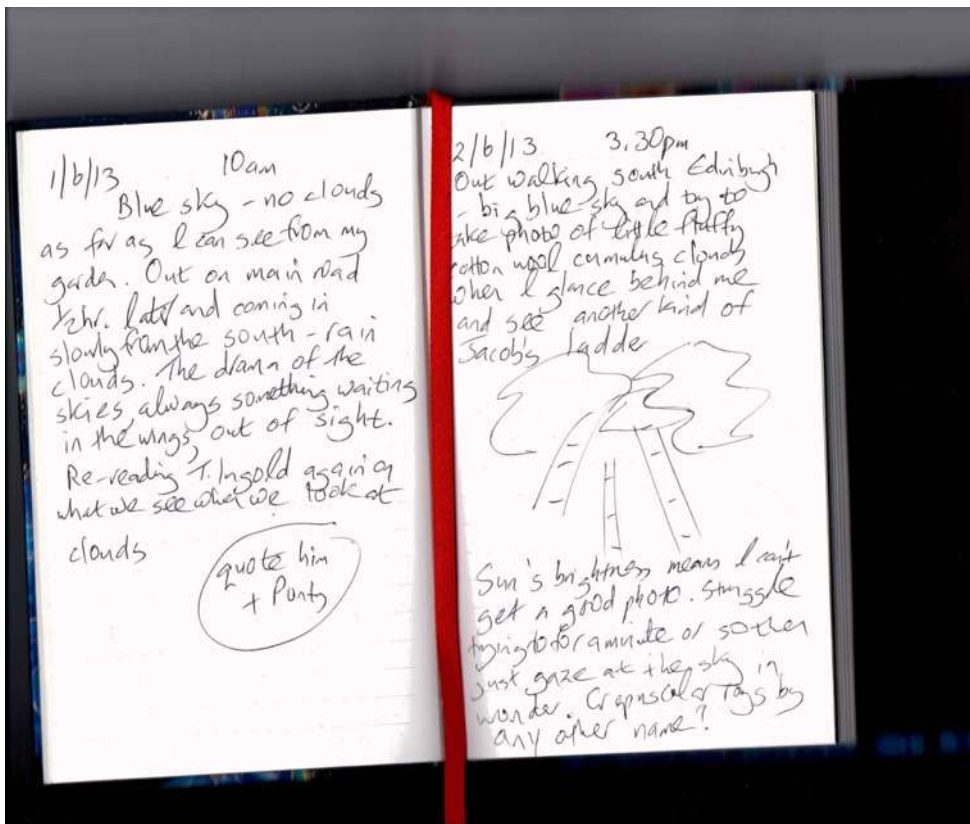


Fig. 14. Scan of sky journal, 1st and 2nd June 2013.

3rd June 2013, 2.30 p. m.

Watching clouds in central Edinburgh, part of the cityscape (see fig. 15).



Fig. 15. Clouds from Hanover Street, 2.30 p. m.

4th June 2013, 11.35 a. m.

Was unsure when exactly to end a month of observing. There are no clouds to be seen right now so feels like time to stop. Somehow this encapsulates their elusiveness. So final picture is of a cloudless blue sky (see fig.16). But in a few minutes it could all look so different...



Fig. 16. Blue sky from garden, 11.35 a.m.

Discussion

I kept a journal for one month, from 6th May to 4th June 2013. My intention was to observe clouds from a particular location - a northwest facing garden at the back of my house in Edinburgh. During the process of keeping the journal my intention and ideas inevitably evolved and I widened my "lens"; these developments are illustrated by journal entries. A favourite song of mine, very much in my mind during my observations, was Little Fluffy Cloud by The Orb.⁴ The first line - 'What were the skies like when you were young?' - was a question I found myself reflecting on often, and remembered lying on my back with friends, spotting shapes in the clouds.

⁴ The Orb, "Little fluffy clouds", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6B1ENLLR8cw>.

The following discussion attempts to place my fieldwork in the context of the sky as a cultural resource. As I observed how the various cloud types and patterns impacted me - both psychologically in terms of mood and practically regarding what weather was in store - I explored material on climactic sky myths, weather lore and cloud divination and found examples from art, music and literature.

Tim Ingold suggests that the aim of observing clouds is, '...not to view the furniture of the sky but to catch a fleeting glimpse of a sky-in-formation, never the same from one moment to the next.'⁵ Throughout my reflexive, phenomenological observations I attempted what Moran describes as an '...unprejudiced, descriptive study of whatever appears to consciousness...', no matter how transitory the experience.⁶ My fieldwork stands alongside work by other individual observers of clouds, such as Kelly DeLay, whose *Clouds 365* project was begun in 2009 and who has been photographing clouds every day since; and fieldwork by the Cloud Appreciation Society, founded in 2005, a mass observation project which has over 32,000 members worldwide.⁷ Some of the Society's members, however, appear to observe sporadically rather than for a sustained period of time, unlike in my project.

Observations by others of cloud shapes and patterns may be found in literature. In Aristophanes' comedy, *The Clouds*, Socrates asks Strepsiades: 'Have you ever gazed up there and seen a cloud shaped like a centaur, or a leopard, wolf, or bull?'⁸ Shakespeare's characters muse in a similar vein; in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony comments, 'Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish; a vapour sometime like a bear or lion.'⁹ In *Hamlet*, Polonius agrees that a certain cloud is 'Very like a whale.'¹⁰ This echoes my own speculations about the various animal shapes I saw and what meanings they held for me.

There have been many efforts, similar to mine, to describe and predict meteorological and mundane events through cloud observation. In the *Meteorologica*, Aristotle elucidates his theories on meteorology, including the formation of rain, clouds, wind and lightning, and asserts - 'It is concerned with events that are natural, though their order is less perfect than that of the first of the elements of bodies. They take place in the region nearest to the motion of the

⁵ Ingold, *Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather*, p.528.

⁶ Moran, *Phenomenology*, p. 1.

⁷ DeLay, *Clouds 365; Cloud Appreciation*.

⁸ Aristophanes, *The Clouds*.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=antonycleo&Act=4&Scene=14&Scope=scene.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=hamlet&Act=3&Scene=2&Scope=scene.

stars.¹¹ The Assyrian omen collection, the *Enuma anu Enlil*, describes the observation of clouds to predict weather changes and how they may affect the king - 'If the sun is surrounded by a halo and a cloud bank lies to the right, there will be catastrophe everywhere in the country.'¹² My observation that impending bad weather may be forecast in bird behaviour corroborates the views of Aratus in his *Phenomena* - 'Oft before a gale the wild ducks or sea-wheeling gulls beat their wings on the shore.'¹³ Irish druids practiced cloud divination and examples occur in a number of medieval Irish texts, in particular the late Middle Irish tale, *Acallam na Senórach*.¹⁴ For instance, when Fionn says to Cainnellsíath - 'Over the hostel I see three clouds brightly. Tell everyone what the explanation for it is, if it be allowed?'¹⁵ More recently, in *Ghost riding*, poet Robert Edgar Burns comments on seeing a cowboy shape in the clouds, 'This never is a good sign, so I tried to ride away'.¹⁶ Perhaps Burns saw, as I did with the saltires, what was culturally familiar to him.

During my observations I noted that weather lore is usually local, based on community observations rather than scientific measurement. There are many current Scottish proverbs relating to rain clouds over hills, which often produce valid predictions, for example, 'When Cheviot ye see put on his cap, of rain ye'll have a wee bit drap'.¹⁷ Some weather lore appears more universally accepted, in particular lore relating to a red sky in the morning - described in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* - 'Like a red morn that ever yet betokened, wreck to the seaman, tempest to the field.'¹⁸ However, the Gaelic proverb, 'Tha'n cat's an luatli, tliig frasan fuar' (The cat is in the ashes, cold showers are coming), is perhaps less universally reliable.¹⁹ Exploring Manilius' use of multiple explanations in the *Astronomica*, Daryn Lehoux comments, 'Reason does not supplant myth'; perhaps we prefer our familiar myths and lore, even when they fly in the face of reason.²⁰

¹¹ Aristotle, *Meteorology*.

¹² Van Soldt, *Solar omens*, p. 128.

¹³ Aratus, *Phenomena*.

¹⁴ Williams, *Druids*.

¹⁵ Williams, *Druids*.

¹⁶ Robert Burns, "Ghost riding", <http://www.redbubble.com/people/reb0214/writing/8539234-ghost-riding>.

¹⁷ Inwards, *Weather Lore*, p.62.

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/poems/poem_view.php?WorkID=venusadonis.

¹⁹ T. D. MacDonald, *Gaelic Proverbs*, p.116.

²⁰ Daryn Lehoux, *Myth and Explanation in Manilius*, in *Forgotten Stars: Rediscovering Manilius' Astronomica*, ed. Katharina Volk and Steven J. Green, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 55.

As the journal excerpts show, I am interested in the impact clouds may have on mood and I concur with Ken Bushe's view that clouds have '...a character as distinct and complex as we do ourselves. They affect our mood and our daily lives.'²¹ I like the comparison by Gavin Pretor-Pinney, of the Cloud Appreciation Society, of clouds to ink blot images; we are free to let our imagination project anything we want onto them.²² In various mythologies there are stories of deities who preside over weather such as Indra, the Indian god of rain and thunderstorms, and Tlaloc, the Aztec god of lightning and rain.²³ Some deities, such as the Greek nymph Nephele, are themselves clouds.²⁴ I wanted to find a Celtic weather deity on whom I could project the blame for Edinburgh's overcast skies. I chose the Cailleach who rules over weather forecasting and is said to live on nearby Arthur's Seat.²⁵ I observed that my moods were affected depending on whether the sky was overcast or cloudless and that I, in turn, projected my mood onto the sky. Similarly, David Abram suggests anger may have come from our '...ancestral, animal experience of thunderstorms...' and tears, '...by our experience of rainfall'.²⁶ There were days when I felt that the dark clouds validated my own low mood and a blue sky would have seemed discordant. Perhaps the transitory nature of clouds gives hope that all things pass and that there may be sunny times ahead.

Conclusion

This essay describes a qualitative research project in which I observed clouds for a month and explored their impact on me. I have attempted to place my observations into the context of this particular sky feature as a cultural resource by considering climactic sky myths, weather lore, cloud divination and examples from art and music.

Adopting a phenomenological, reflexive approach enabled me to enjoy gazing at the ever-changing patterns and shapes that clouds conjure up, as well as to note the meaning and significance I attached to what I saw and the impact it had on me. Initially I was also interested in learning more about cloud

²¹ Ken Bushe, http://www.kenbushe.co.uk/html/air_sky_and_cloud_paintings.html.

²² Gavin Pretor-Pinney, "Cloudy with a chance of joy", http://www.ted.com/talks/gavin_pretor_pinney_cloudy_with_a_chance_of_joy.html.

²³ Stookey, *World Mythology*, p.106.

²⁴ Ovid, *Fasti*, p. 184.

²⁵ Stuart McHardy and Donald Smith, *Arthur's Seat: Journeys and Evocations* (Edinburgh: Luath Press Ltd., 2012), p. 83.

²⁶ David Abram, *Becoming animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books 2010), [hereafter, Abram, *Becoming Animal*], p.153.

classification and meteorology but as my observations proceeded, the psychological impact rather than the forecasting aspects of cloud watching became more meaningful. Based on the examples I have presented I conclude that the activity of cloud watching may be universal and long-standing. I had a feeling of loss as I concluded my journal and a sense of what David Abram calls, '...our yearning for engagement with the more-than-human otherness.'²⁷ I have decided therefore to keep observing clouds and hope for frequent cloudy skies.

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²⁷ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, p.277.

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