

Book Review

The Weather Factor

By David M. Ludlum, Houghton Mifflin,
288 pages. \$17.95 Cloth. \$9.95 Paper.

Reviewed by Patrick Hughes (1)

Someone has said that happiness is working at what you love to do. Judging by his books, Dave Ludlum must be a very happy man.

The Weather Factor is the latest in a series of Ludlum books that have established him as the leading and most systematic chronicler of American weather. It shares the same solid virtues as its predecessors -- thorough research, impeccable documentation, painstaking meteorological reconstructions, a good sense of historical perspective, and a lively, anecdotal writing style.

Much of the appeal of this book comes from Ludlum's examination of the broad flow of American history and life, as well as the weather events associated with them. The major themes -- colonial days, war, presidential elections and inaugurations, sports, and flight -- are hardly new. Yet to each Ludlum brings his penchant for original research and synthesis, not only of weather events, but of major patterns and minor threads in the colorful tapestry of American history (and even of geologic events such as continental drift).

Ludlum has done a fine job compiling so much that is so good in a single volume. There are interesting insights, like Ludlum's characterization of Washington's winter in Valley Forge as "not a severe one." There are little known facts and forgotten moments in American history, as well as skillful analyses of major events and national moods and their relationship to weather. There are fascinating pictures (many the reviewer has never seen, though he has researched some of the same subjects). And there are numerous incidental trivia tidbits, such as which president's inauguration was the first to be recorded in motion pictures (William McKinley's, 1897).

There is a fascinating retelling of the first flight at Kitty Hawk -- and of subsequent aviation "firsts." There are accounts of recent cross-Atlantic balloon flights and a vivid, detailed documentation of the destruction of the great airships of the 1930s -- the Shenandoah, the Akron, the Macon, and of course, the Hindenburg. All except possibly the last were victims of weather -- updrafts, down-drafts, and wind gusts. Ludlum is at his best here as historian, meteorologist, and writer, provid-

ing thorough, professional analysis while still telling a gripping story.

Second to the section on airships, the one on weather and presidents most impressed the reviewer. The section about presidential inaugurations, where weather is often secondary to historical panorama, is the most thoroughly researched and detailed the reviewer has seen, despite many previous publications of such accounts.

Ludlum also covers sports -- from tennis and golf to baseball, football, horse racing, and even the Boston Marathon. In each case, he not only details the weather and its impact, but provides a lively account of how it all got started and of its place in American life.

This is a good reference book for meteorologists, weather buffs, historians, writers, and anyone else interested in weather and/or American life. It is episodic, suitable for dipping into, rather than reading at a single sitting. In some sections, it literally takes the form of an almanac or diary, recording the weather facts event by event, good or bad, significant or incidental -- much in the tradition of the weather diarists Ludlum so diligently searches out and quotes.

The historical value of such a record can be seen on pages 98 and 99, where Ludlum gently and diplomatically corrects Civil War chronicler Bruce Catton's account of the weather at Appomattox, Virginia on the day Grant surrendered to Lee.

FOOTNOTE

1. Patrick Hughes has written more than 60 articles published in the popular and professional press, many on American weather and history. He also wrote A Century of Weather Service, commemorating the 1970 Centennial of all U. S. weather services and their predecessors. He was author/editor of American Weather Stories, originally published for the Nation's Bicentennial celebration. Reprinted several times, this book traces the American weather experience from the hurricanes that threatened Columbus to the weather that has plagued Inauguration Day ceremonies. A former NWS forecaster, Mr. Hughes is Chief of the Information and Communications Unit of NOAA's National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service (NESDIS).