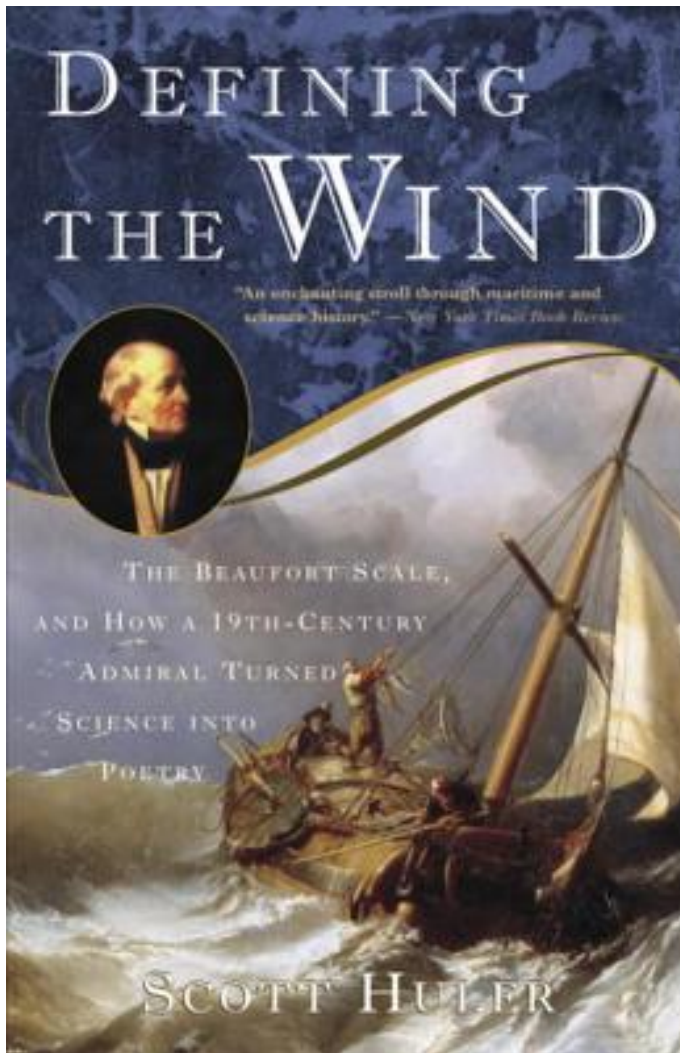

Scott Huler

Defining the Wind: The Beaufort Scale and How a 19th-Century Admiral Turned Science into Poetry



Title: Defining the Wind: The Beaufort Scale and How a 19th-Century Admiral Turned Science into Poetry

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Description

“Nature, rightly questioned, never lies.” —A Manual of Scientific Enquiry, Third Edition, 1859

Scott Huler was working as a copy editor for a small publisher when he stumbled across the Beaufort Wind Scale in his Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary. It was one of those moments of discovery that writers live for. Written centuries ago, its 110 words launched Huler on a remarkable journey over land and sea into a fascinating world of explorers, mariners, scientists, and writers. After falling in love with what he decided was “the best, clearest, and most vigorous piece of descriptive writing I had ever seen,” Huler went in search of Admiral Francis Beaufort himself: hydrographer

to the British Admiralty, man of science, and author—Huler assumed—of the Beaufort Wind Scale. But what Huler discovered is that the scale that carries Beaufort’s name has a long and complex evolution, and to properly understand it he had to keep reaching farther back in history, into the lives and works of figures from Daniel Defoe and Charles Darwin to Captains Bligh, of the *Bounty*, and Cook, of the *Endeavor*.

As hydrographer to the British Admiralty it was Beaufort’s job to track the information that ships relied on: where to lay anchor, descriptions of ports, information about fortification, religion, and trade. But what came to fascinate Huler most about Beaufort was his obsession for observing things and communicating to others what the world looked like.

Huler’s research landed him in one of the most fascinating and rich periods of history, because all around the world in the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in a grand, expansive period, modern science was being invented every day. These scientific advancements encompassed not only vast leaps in understanding but also how scientific innovation was expressed and even organized, including such enduring developments as the scale Anders Celsius created to simplify how Gabriel Fahrenheit measured temperature; the French-designed metric system; and the Gregorian calendar adopted by France and Great Britain. To Huler, Beaufort came to embody that passion for scientific observation and categorization; indeed Beaufort became the great scientific networker of his time. It was he, for example, who was tapped to lead the search for a naturalist in the 1830s to accompany the crew of the *Beagle*; he recommended a young naturalist named Charles Darwin.

Defining the Winds a wonderfully readable, often humorous, and always rich story that is ultimately about how we observe the forces of nature and the world around us.

From the Hardcover edition.

Insightful reviews

Jennifer Kay: This book should be required reading.

Arwen: I heard the author on NPR a few years ago when the book came out and was

enthralled. I'm finally reading the book, and wonder why it took me so long. It's a wonderful meditation on the language of science and the poetry of language.

Marvin: I never would have picked up this book on my own, but I'm glad my friend Mary recommended it. Even so, I didn't read all of it, because parts of it just didn't interest me very much. But that's certainly not the author's fault. What's really remarkable is that I spent as many hours as I did with it, because I wouldn't have thought that I'd have found ANY of it very interesting. It's a book, if you can believe it about only The Beaufort Scale, a table devised, sort of like the Richter Scale for earthquakes, to measure the intensity of wind, and about the man to whom it is credited. One could hardly imagine a book entirely about that. But here it is. And the author's intellectual curiosity and engaging writing are absolutely infectious. And, in fact, one realizes long before he says so explicitly 12 pages from the end that it's really a book about calling all of us to live lives devoted to "paying attention." The Beaufort Scale [and, I would add, this book about it] is "about noticing whether smoke rises vertically or drifts, whether it's the leaves shaking or the whole branches, whether your umbrella turns inside out or just rattles around some. More, it's about taking note of those details, filing them away, in memory or . . . in the notebook you'd never leave the house without. . . . It's about being able to express what you've seen simply and clearly, in as few words as possible, so that others can share it. It's about the good of sharing that knowledge, of everyone paying attention so that, together, we can learn as much as possible. . . . It's a philosophy of attentiveness, a religion based on observation: an entire ethos in 110 words." This is a book that, because of its subject, is unlikely to attract as large an audience as it surely deserves.

John: nonfiction,history,science

Jane: Very completely researched; it sort of feels in the direction of the top a bit "I to discover this out, i am placing it within the e-book even if it really is attention-grabbing or not, goddamnit," yet more often than not an inspiring manifesto for patient, 18th-century variety commentary of the world. "Nature, adequately questioned, by no means lies."

Susan G: a bit essay at the op-ed web page of the NYT at some point used to be so stable (read it here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/04/opi...> and notice in case you agree) that i really despatched the writer an email thanking him (and I obtained a pleasant response). yet his e-book was once approximately ... the Beaufort Scale for wind velocity?? I needed to learn extra of that remarkable writing, though, and i'm SO pleased I did. What a very good book! not just concerning the Beaufort Scale, of course, even supposing he manages to make even that truly fascinating. I realized approximately reproduction editing, the wonderful thing about scales, how technological know-how mysteriously replaced from observational to experimental within the nineteenth C. (and how that modified EVERYTHING), Darwin and Dafoe, and a lot more -- a type of books that makes you ask yourself the way you did not recognize all these items before. an enormous bonus used to be that he's so humorous i used to be giggling difficult out loud in the course of the book. a bit gem; do not leave out it.

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