

Inigo Jones: The Weather Prophet

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I'm currently working on a html version of this with added links and content, but in the meantime...

Prologue

Canberra was in the grip of a heatwave — the longest in its recorded history. After two weeks of hot weather, the temperature topped the century once more, as 800 visitors swarmed into town for the 1939 meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (otherwise known as ANZAAS). All accommodation was booked; delegates were billeted to homes in Canberra and Queanbeyan, while some of the more adventurous took to camping, creating 'a miniature scientists' settlement' on the banks of the Molonglo River. As well as the heat, visitors grappled with the city's unusual layout. The *Canberra Times* reported, 'even members of the geography and astronomical sections lost their bearings'.

The following day, 11 January 1939, delegates gathered at Telopea Park School for the opening of the congress. As the temperature soared again to a record 108.5^o, the *Canberra Times* observed that 'most interest of a scientific character centred [on] a courageous prophecy by Mr Inigo Jones the famous Queensland weather forecaster'. Jones predicted an early end to the broiling conditions. 'The heat wave', he explained, 'was cyclical, occurring at 35 year intervals'. There had been similar spells in the 1867-68 season and again, 35 years later, in 1902-3. Therefore the current heat wave, Jones claimed confidently, 'was following expected lines'. As the death toll mounted and the threat of bushfire loomed, everyone hoped that he was right.

The ANZAAS meeting brought together the nation's scientific elite, as well as a number of eminent visitors — including HG Wells. But amidst this jostle of intellectual worthies, Inigo Jones was, according to the *Canberra Times*, 'one of the outstanding figures'. Jones was a determined battler whose 'fight for recognition as a long range forecaster' had begun in the early 1920s. Although he had received some support from the Queensland government, the newspaper noted that commonwealth authorities had been 'stubbornly turning deaf ears to his claims'. However, it seemed that this attitude might finally be changing, for the federal government had recently announced the formation of a special committee to investigate Jones's methods.

With the details of this committee still to be finalised, the ANZAAS meeting offered Jones a timely platform from which to espouse the benefits of his system. 'I am getting along with the paper for the Congress and trust to make a good job of it', Jones wrote to David Rivett in December 1938, 'perhaps some of the committee of enquiry may hear it read'. His paper, entitled 'Meteorology as a branch of astronomy', surveyed international research into the use of astronomical cycles for long range weather forecasting. As Jones explained, the idea that our weather might be determined by celestial events was 'by no means new'.

The appearance of spots on the surface of the sun had long been the source of conjecture, particularly when it was recognised, around the middle of the nineteenth century, that the number of sunspots increases and decreases on a regular cycle of around 11 years. Given that the sun dominates our experience of weather, might not this sunspot cycle set in motion regular changes in the Earth's climate? In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many scientists and enthusiastic amateurs embarked on the hunt for climatic cycles, believing that if such patterns could be found, then it might at last be possible to forecast the weather not just months, but

perhaps even years ahead.

'After fifty years' study' Inigo Jones was convinced that he had discovered the 'key to the puzzle'. The sunspot cycle, he explained, was determined by the movements of the outer planets — Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, and Uranus. This critical insight enabled him to derive a series of cycles, of varying length and importance, that could be used to develop long-range forecasts. 'I am convinced... that the sunspot period is due to the action of Jupiter first and the other planets later', he concluded his address, 'and just as Pythagorus and Hipparchus, and later Copernicus, grasped the truth but not the whole truth, so may this work yet need its Kepler to place the coping stone of completion upon it'. On that modest note, Queensland's Copernicus commended his paper to the further study of the assembled scientists.

Discussion followed amongst members of the 'Astronomy, Mathematics, and Physics' section of ANZAAS. 'We have worked out all the cycles in England', commented Sir George Simpson, the Director of the British Meteorological Bureau, 'but they only give you an explanation of about 1 per cent of the weather variations'. Nonetheless, he advised Jones to continue his observations in the hope of finding some mathematical relation from which 'reliable deductions' could be made. Speaking 'as one prophet to a brother prophet', Professor VA Bailey similarly urged Jones to make predictions that were open to scientific verification.

The mood changed, however, when Edward Kidson, the New Zealand government meteorologist, took the floor. Detailed criticism of Jones's paper 'would be merely a waste of time', he asserted. Indeed, he insisted that Jones himself had 'no clear mental picture' of the mechanisms he was describing. Kidson was in no mind to indulge the fancies of the elderly Queenslanders, and moved that the section express an opinion that the paper 'fell far below the standard which should be expected in a communication to such a gathering of scientists'. Discussion was quashed, and Jones withdrew, disappointed.

This 'harsh and ill-mannered' treatment outraged *The Land* newspaper, one of Jones's most steadfast supporters. 'It was a clear indication', the newspaper thundered, 'of just what Mr Jones can expect at the hands of those scientists who believe that because a system is new, or not universally accepted, it lacks merit or is not even worthy of investigation'. It warned the government to ensure that such 'biased critics' were not appointed to the committee that was to review Jones's system. *Country Life* lambasted 'so-called scientists' whose intolerance made the newspaper 'inclined to despair of "homo sapiens"'. But 'the joke is on them', the article concluded, for while Inigo Jones's efforts at long-range forecasting had won him the admiration of ordinary farmers, 'the official academicised meteorologists of the world cannot accurately forecast the weather a day ahead'.

The ANZAAS Congress marked a critical moment in Jones's career, as he waited for the review committee to pass judgement on his system. But the Congress also highlighted the dramatic divergence in opinions surrounding the weather prophet himself. For some Inigo Jones was a neglected visionary, to others nothing more than a crank. While now he is generally cast as an amusing sidelight in the development of Australian meteorology, he is still remembered by many as a great Queensland scientist, and his forecasts continue to attract attention — particularly in times of drought.

As we grapple still with the unpredictability of our climate, with the difficulties of seasonal forecasting, it seems worthwhile to reconsider the life and work of a man who was believed to hold the answer to our uncertainties. This is not a complete biography of Inigo Jones. Instead it is an attempt to trace some of the events, influences, and relationships that culminated in the review of his system in 1939. The focus is on the way Jones and his quest were perceived — by meteorologists, by scientists, by supporters, and, of course, by himself.

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