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## An icy blast from the past

In Ireland, the combined effects of the 'Beast from the East' and Storm Emma led to what the media termed 'Snowmageddon', probably the most heavily covered weather event in Irish history. Writing as the slow thaw sets in, miles of column inches in national and local newspapers have been, and continue to be, dedicated to conveying the impacts and causes of the recent snow and associated societal responses. The devotion of media attention to weather extremes is not new. Indeed, recent reflections on and comparisons with past snow events in 1982, 1967, 1947 and 1927 have made reference to newspaper coverage at the time.

Ireland has some of the longest running newspapers in the world. These offer unique insight into past weather extremes and can help build a picture of events that pre-date even basic weather measurements. Of particular note are the *Belfast Newsletter* (one of the world's oldest continuously published newspapers) and the *Freeman's Journal*, which began reporting in the early and mid-eighteenth century, respectively. Recent research published in *Weather* has shown that these newspaper archives can be used to trace the progression of drought events and impacts, revealing that over the last 250 years droughts have resulted in agricultural hardship, and water resource crises and failures (Murphy *et al.*, 2017). We can do the same for historical, and often forgotten, cold extremes and snow events.

A case in point is the winter of 1783/1784, from which we can build remarkable insight from the *Freeman's Journal* alone. From the outset, the winter was remarkably cold and snowy by the standards of living memory at the time. The *Freeman's Journal* reported that *great falls of snow were accompanied by strong easterly winds, as ever was remembered, with a coach travelling from Dublin to Cork getting into such depth of snow that it was impossible to extricate the horses before they perished. Unlike the current situation, in which the thaw, by luck, has been slow, and significant flooding thus far avoided, a rapid thaw in early January 1784, together with heavy and incessant rainfall associated with the passage of a storm*

from the south, caused widespread flooding throughout Dublin City. On 5 January the *Freeman's Journal* reported the following:

*The very sudden thaw after the late fall of snow, together with heavy and incessant rain on Friday, occasioned such floods in and about the city, as were attended with considerable injury to the inhabitants situated within the limits of its effects. The Liffey and the Dodder overflowed all the circumjacent low grounds, and the Poddle water course covered Patrick Street [...] to an unprecedented height, having risen at the church to near six feet. Ship Street, the Lower Castle Yard and Dame Street as far as Sycamore Alley, were laid under water.*

The reporting goes on to indicate how the sudden onset of floods resulted in extensive losses given the lack of opportunity to remove assets from harm's way and gives an account of the death of two young men, killed following the collapse of a building due to the underground torrent produced by the Poddle River.

Later in January and throughout February, cold easterly winds and associated icy and snowy conditions were re-established. Reports throughout February 1784, in particular, speak of great hardship, social unrest and unusual events. On 2 February the *Freeman's Journal* included reports of mobs in Clonmel raiding mills and storehouses in search of corn, before it was shipped to Dublin. In Dublin reference is made to the hordes of *shivering wretches, destitute of clothing, many even without shoes – famine in their countenances and despair in their looks, saved from perishing only by the aid distributed by the Houses of Industry. On a single day in early February, no less than 4000 people in Dublin were charitably provided with a pound of bread and a boiled herring. In the countryside, the plight of the rural poor was reported as pitiable, without a possibility of earning their daily subsistence, the earth on which they depend for a livelihood, being one continued mass of frost. Without food, without fuel, no wonder the advices from all parts brings accounts of robbery and devastation (Freeman's Journal, 2 February 1784).*

Throughout February 1784 reference is regularly made to the Liffey (Dublin's main river) being frozen, with people skating upstream and downstream of the bridges. This activity was not without its perils, as reported on 4 February:

*The danger of skating on the Liffey becomes hourly more apparent: yesterday*

*a boy was drowned by the failure of the ice, and some others very narrowly escaped. On standing waters, this exercise is subject to less danger; but on the Liffey, where the flow and ebb of the tide work upon the ice, it is particularly fool hardy to run the risk that gentlemen do.*

Ice build-up on the Grand Canal – a major transport route from the midlands to Dublin at the time – was problematic for navigation and impeded the delivery of goods to the city, while roads around the capital were reported to be covered by more than two feet (0.6m) of snow. In the north, advantage was taken of a frozen Lough Neagh to shorten the distances for horses drawing carts of grain to Belfast.

Evident then, is that while exceptional in our living memory, the recent 'Snowmageddon' is not really unprecedented in the context of long-term records. As evidenced by newspaper reports, the adverse effects of recent events could have been considerably worse. One wonders what someone who lived through winter 1783/1784 would make of our reaction to and reporting on recent events. Newspaper archives thus offer a valuable insight into all kinds of weather extremes for a period before modern weather observing. While debate is ongoing about whether the snow of 2018 carries a fingerprint of human-caused climate change, the causes of the extreme winter of 1783/1784 (whether due to volcanic eruption in Iceland or simply natural climate variability, or both) still remain contentious in the academic literature (Schmidt *et al.*, 2012). Let us hope that we can provide a more timely answer this time around.

## References

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