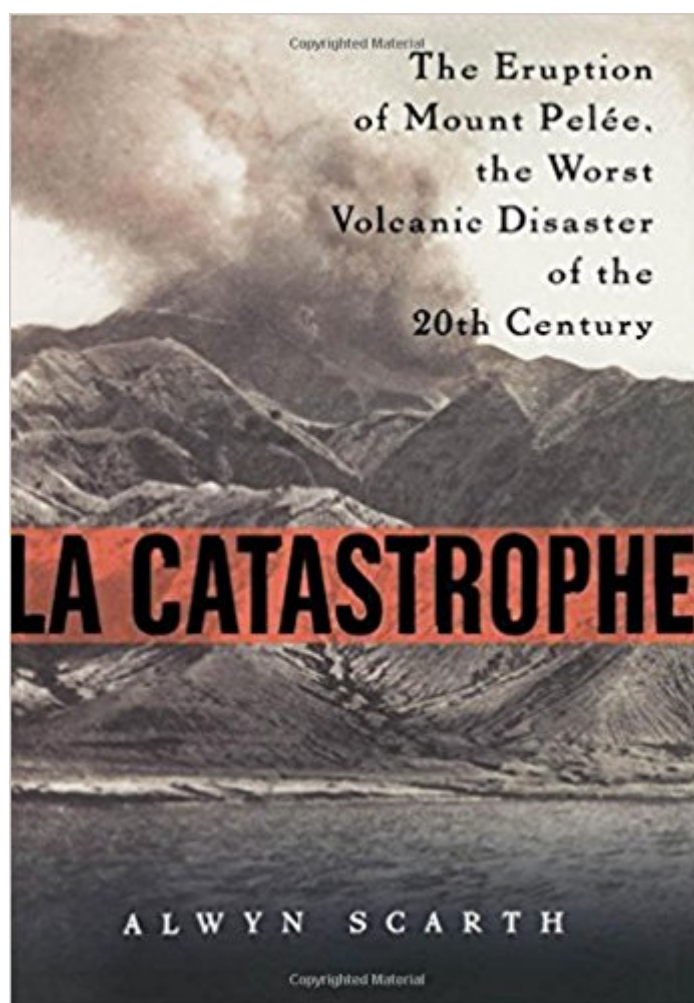


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# La Catastrophe: The Eruption Of Mount Pelee, The Worst Volcanic Disaster Of The 20th Century



## Synopsis

On May 8, 1902, on the Caribbean island of Martinique, the volcano Mount Pelée loosed the most terrifying and lethal eruption of the twentieth century. In minutes, it killed 27,000 people and leveled the city of Saint-Pierre. In *La Catastrophe*, Alwyn Scarth provides a gripping day-by-day and hour-by-hour account of this devastating eruption, based primarily on chilling eyewitness accounts. Scarth recounts how, for many days before the great eruption, a series of smaller eruptions spewed dust and ash. Then came the eruption. A blinding flash lit up the sky. A tremendous cannonade roared out that was heard in Venezuela. Then a scorching blast of superheated gas and ash shot straight down towards Saint-Pierre, racing down at hundreds of miles an hour. This infernal avalanche of dark, billowing, reddish-violet fumes, flashing lightning, ash and rocks, crashed and rolled headlong, destroying everything in its path--public buildings, private homes, the town hall, the Grand Hotel. Temperatures inside the cloud reached 450 degrees Celsius. Virtually everyone in Saint-Pierre died within minutes. Scarth tells of many lucky escapes--the ship *Topaze* left just hours before the eruption, a prisoner escaped death in solitary confinement. But these were the fortunate few. An official delegation sent later that day by the mayor of Fort-de-France reported total devastation--no quays, no trees, only shattered facades. Saint-Pierre was a smoldering ruin. In the tradition of *A Perfect Storm* and *Isaac's Storm*, but on a much larger scale, *La Catastrophe* takes readers inside the greatest volcanic eruption of the century and one of the most tragic natural disasters of all time.

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## Customer Reviews

When nature kills on a grand scale, it does so indiscriminately: a murderer may be spared and an orphanage destroyed. So it was with the May 8, 1902, eruption of Mount Pelee on the Caribbean island of Martinique, author Alwyn Scarth shows in *La Catastrophe*, his study of the event. The explosion, more specifically, its aftermath--a 300 mph burst of superheated gas as well as roiling mudflows and tsunamis--killed more than 28,000 people, sank a dozen seaborne ships, and reduced the city of Saint-Pierre to rubble. Scarth, after briefly delineating the island's geology and history, methodically describes the increasingly fraught days before the event and, with gruesome precision, the event itself. Most welcome are his many sidebars, including firsthand accounts by survivors, newspaper stories, and lists of widespread rumors (and their dispelling). As well, the book is amply and instructively illustrated. The prose is powerful and understated, and the book somberly thrilling and perceptive. Nor does it avoid ghastly ironies. A few months after the eruption, Scarth observes, "the ruins of Saint-Pierre suffered the supreme indignity of becoming an attraction for boatloads of tourists." --H. O'Billovich

Noted volcanologist Scarth (*Vulcan's Fury: Man Against the Volcano*) has produced the definitive study of the horrendous 1902 eruption of Martinique's Mount Pelee, which annihilated the Caribbean island's capital. While the destruction has long been infamous Saint Pierre, the capital, was leveled in less than two minutes its tragic dimensions are fully explored for the first time by Scarth, whose analysis of archival research, eyewitness accounts and his own research show how the city's residents could not have guessed their fate, for Mount Pelee threw a lethal type of eruption at them that scientists had never previously fully recognized or studied. Scarth's day-by-day and hour-by-hour account remains gripping from beginning to end. His prose (Mount Pelee roared like a rampant lion throughout 7 May, punctuating its monotonous background noise with muffled cannonades that hurled huge blocks high into the air) skillfully contrasts the historical facts about Saint-Pierre, the home of white supremacy, with its self-made image as the Pearl of the West Indies, providing a much-needed sociological dimension to the natural tragedy. He also breaks out hardcore scientific data into engaging sidebars. By providing a wealth of archival photos from before and after the destruction, Scarth maintains the reader's interest without watering down his formidable knowledge of how volcanoes actually work. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

I haven't even finished the book but there were a couple of issues I have noticed already. In one case, there were several pages where the writing was double-typed and smeary and looked as

though someone had scanned in sheets of pages that had been badly typed using old carbon paper. Another issue was the slight case of "hindsight is 20/20" history near the beginning. Yes, we all know that slavery is wrong and that some segments of the population (ie--people of color) got the short end of the stick in centuries past while the "white oppressors" lorded it over them. This is historic fact and, while we would consider it to be wrong today, that was a different time and place. There was a judgemental tone to the writing that I found objectionable. History should be kept in its perspective unless the writer was deliberately trying to incite negative emotions within the modern-day reader. Other than that, I find that I have been enjoying the book. Since much of it is based on the translated French and Dutch writings of the day about La Catastrophe, it offers a different view of the demise of St. Pierre than the English-based accounts. I look forward to reading more. The book is a bit pricey, as ebooks go, but I think it might be worth it.

The transfer from print to kindle was poorly done, so it is hard to read and the pictures are difficult to make out. Beyond those technical issues, which are not the fault of the author, the author's continual snarky remarks make for unpleasant reading, even though there is clearly a wealth of information on the 1902 eruption of Pelee.

If you want to know about the 1902 volcano, you need to read three books. This one, *The Day the World Ended* by Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan Witts, 1969; and *The Last Days of St. Pierre* by Ernest Zebrowski, 2002. Any one of these books is likely to lead to a somewhat skewed idea as in each case the authors have strong opinions. There is a lot to like in Scarth's book. He was careful with his sources and information, and has a much more academic approach to the background. He also gives more dialogue and original source material than the other two books. He also gave a much better map of salient features in St. Pierre, which pinpointed where the survivor Leandre's house was (I had always wondered). However, Scarth definitely is opinionated. He vilifies Fernand Clerk. No academic nuance here: "Fernand Clerk's assertions were the affirmations of a rather despicable politician out for short-term gain. Such an individual would probably not greatly worry that he had done much to destroy the reputation of an honorable man." This seems to be not only over-the-top, but completely contrary to the very detailed picture painted of Le Clerc in the other books, both of which portray Le Clerc as a man who while, drafted into politics, was not particularly politically ambitious, who was very straight-laced, and who really cared (as much as any planter did) for the working class. Le Clerc was a much more pivotal figure in the other books and I think they are right. He did after all create the museum which still stands in St. Pierre today. The reason for

Scarth's ire is that after the eruption, Le Clerc criticized the by now late Mouttet for not considering evacuation, and for doing his best to persuade people to stay put. Scarth wrote: "Fernand Clerc's own behavior does not stand scrutiny. He himself took no steps to save lives. He had ample opportunity to publish his misgivings in *Les Colonies*, the editor of which Marius Hurard, was one of his strongest political allies". According to both other books, Fernand Clerk did his best to start a movement for evacuation and was thoroughly rebuffed. Also according to both other books, while Hurard did support Clerc for the election, he was not overly fond of him, and they were diametrically opposed on the question of the volcano and safety. There is no reason to suppose that Hurard would have published such an opposing view. But where Scarth really seems nuts to me is his idea, expressed more than once, that those who saved themselves were weak-kneed, panicky individuals, while it was the rational, clear-thinking courageous people who got eaten by the inferno. Just one example: "Thus at St. Pierre, the rational people, with common sense and intelligence, saw less danger from the volcano and died, whereas those who followed their gut reactions and panicked survived, because Mount Pelee produced a weapon that defied all expectation and all the logic that they knew." To me, the contrarians, like Le Clerc, and the captain of Orsolina were the true heroes. It was not that they were irrational or panicky; it was that they took a good look at the erupting volcano and decided, quite rightly as it turned out, that it was unsafe. This was not irrational; it was based on millions of years of evolution that allows any one of us to make judgments about safety; this is true common sense. There may be occasions where it makes sense to override these instincts in the face of scientific knowledge. But this clearly was not one of them. Science knew little about volcanoes in those days, and in any case there was no scientist around to lend his voice, just Landes, the science teacher at the high school.

The author describes the events and some important players in the destruction of a city at the hands of a *nuee ardente* aka a pyroclastic dense current. The book was written by a geologist so it is very descriptive but some assumptions are made as to the reader's familiarity with volcanoes. It was a bit dry at times but it is hard to find such an informative book that can also be a gripping read, that is a very steep mountain to summit. The writer also included helpful maps and many photographs which also guided the reader into developing an interest in the story. A long time ago I read a far more entertaining version of the account but I now realize it was fraught with many errors. This book is very accurate and I would say that anyone interested in this subject should give this book a chance. I am keeping it as a definitive reference book on the subject for my personal library.

Spurred on by Scarth's great 'Vulcan's Fury: Man against the Volcano' and my interest in the Pel e disaster of 1902, I purchased this book from . First of all, Scarth really knows his business and, just as importantly, he knows how to convey it to the audience. However, there are some stylistic aspects that I have trouble with, most of all Scarth's preference for drama, as witnessed in sentences of the '... but little did he know that in a few days...' variety. Already present in 'Vulcan's Fury', it tends to become very annoying in this book. The story doesn't need it, and neither does the book. The second problem is something that is hardly Scarth's fault, but sent me a real Monday morning copy: low-res images, smeared print, unreadable text, mired photographs, the works. I don't know whether this is a unique problem, but you might want to check out this title in a bookstore - at least be aware of possible quality issues. All in all a worthwhile book, but I'd go with Ernst Zabrowski's 'The last days of St. Pierre' any day. However, it needs to be said that both authors put their emphasis differently, with Zabrowski giving a detailed picture of the days leading up to the May 8 eruption, and Scarth devoting more attention to the events following the disaster.

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