

Krakatoa

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On August 27 1883, at 10:02 local time, the volcano Krakatoa exploded and half of the island of which it was a major part vaporized, and six cubic mile of mountain was spread as dust into the atmosphere. It was a truly spectacular event, closely monitored, reported on in real time, the news of which spread to the rest of the worlds within hours, thanks to the new technology of underwater telegraphic cables. It was not the most violent volcanic explosion in recorded history, however, in 1815 there was an even more violent outbreak of Tambora, also in the East Indies, hurling much more material into the sky, and causing a far more serious global devastation, in terms of falling temperatures and ensuing crop-failures; but none that made such an immediate impact in the news media.

The author tries to fit everything into the narrative, (which actually goes back a few monmths before the final outburst, involving minor eruptions and a disturbed sea) as if the mere presentation of this awesome disaster was not enough, but that the author needs to pad things out in order to attract a wider audience. Thus he gives a potted history of early Asian Colonialism, the rise of the Dutch commercial interest, as well as a thumb-nail sketch of the botany and local customs of the islands. Add to this a survey of modern plate-tectonics, with vignettes of Wegener lost on the Greenland Ice, and the authors own geological experience as a junior of yet another arctic tour, with marginal relevance to the story. The author takes the injunction to put an event into a general context, social, historical, geological, you name it, to the extreme. In addition to that he wants to also have it as a pure adventure story, with gripping anecdotes of people being swallowed up by the onslaught of enormous waves, fighting for their lives, and in fact, about thirty thousand people perishing, most of them by drowning. The disturbed water travelled afar, slowly dissipating themselves, so did the tremendous sound, by many distant witnesses mistaken for navy thunder, some of them as far away as in the western parts of the Indian Ocean. The dips and jerks of atmospheric pressure was recorded all over the world, allowing in retrospect a precise timing of the event. In fact those disturbances travelled seven times around the world before being subsumed in general noise. But those were immediate effects, the dust would indeed take a long time to settle, and for many months thereafter the world was blessed with particularly spectacular sunsets, some of them competently, if conventionally, documented. And more morbidly, the debris of the eruption, in form of pumic stones, floating on water, brought with it human skeletons, some of them deposited as far away as South Africa. So will it happen again? Surely with the case of Krakatao, which is again rising as a volcanic island, having been beaten by the sea a few times, but now definitely having gotten a firm hold. The processes that creates vulcanoes are still very much going on along the suduction zones around the world. Surely Karakatoa, along with many other potenyal hazards, is being closely watched, in the hope that next time around, sufficient warning may be had.

One would have prefered the writer to mainly stick to the natural facts, be it with

an inevitable aside to the impact on human life and civilization, and to do it with more depth and fortitude. As it is the scientific explanations are half-hearted, never going beyond the descriptive and thus not really explaining what really went on. Needless to say there is not a single mathematical formula, except two somewhat contradictory ones in a footnote. One suspects that this state of affair is not entirely due to concern for the general reader but also reflects the authors incompetence, in spite of what seems to have been a burgeoning geological career, before he started on a journalistic one, with many a book on his conscience.

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