



Simon Winchester

Krakatoa
ISBN13: 9780060838591

Your academic training is in geology. Was writing this book something of a return to your roots?

It most certainly was, and a delightful one too. I had revisited geology once before, with *The Map that Changed the World*, and that experience was very gratifying (as it was to my Oxford tutor, who is now in his eighties and had long since given up wondering if I would ever come good). Having had so much fun with *The Map*, I thought I might try a larger and more dramatic story.

In *Krakatoa*, you elaborate on the geologists and scientists whose contributions enable our understanding of the nature of the catastrophe. Why did you decide to include their stories in your account of the eruption?

I find the science behind major natural events almost more interesting than the way in which those same events wreak their effects on human society. The nature of catastrophe is, after all, reasonably unvarying in the way it ruins, destroys, wounds and devastates. But if something can be learned from the event — not least something as profound as the theory of plate tectonics — then it somehow puts the ruination into a much more positive light.

Your account of Alfred Russel Wallace's theory of the survival of the fittest (and Darwin's use of it) is fascinating. Why is Wallace so little known?

I regret to say that the British class system had much to do with the reason the very well-connected Charles Darwin from the London area was more highly regarded than Wallace, the ill-connected amateur enthusiast from the Welsh borders. Wallace was also away from Britain for a very long time, and was less able to cultivate influential friends and perform public relations work for himself. He only had his science; Darwin had so very much more — and was a formidable networker, to boot.

You propose multiple explanations for how Krakatoa got its name. Are you drawn to any particular one?

I love the idea that it was all a mistake, perpetrated by a careless telegraph operator and then made permanent by a newspaper compositor who thought 'Krakatoa' so very euphonious a word. I'm glad the error was made: Krakatoa is a truly pleasing word to the western ear, and so much more pleasing than the proper name, Krakatau.

In your account of the eruption, you rely on information recorded by instruments of the Batavia gas works. How did these documents escape destruction?

Very little in Batavia itself — which was a hundred miles east of the site of the eruption — was damaged or destroyed. The ruin took place in the Strait and in the low-lying coastal areas — so much of the scientific data relating to conditions in Java at the time of the eruption escaped destruction. The Dutch were also meticulous record-keepers, and made certain the Krakatoa data was sent back to Holland, and preserved for all time.

If current methods of detecting volcanic activity had existed in 1883, would they have lessened the horrific loss of life that resulted from the Krakatoa eruption?

Without a doubt. One has only to look at the accuracy with which the eruption of Mount St. Helens was predicted in 1980. Had the US Geological Survey had strain-measuring devices on the flanks of Krakatoa in 1883 they would have been able to warn people of impending trouble, and would have tried to persuade the inhabitants of the coastal communities to evacuate. Whether they would have succeeded in that effort — the locals may well have resisted, claiming that they knew better — remains an open question.

What is your next project?

I am working on book about an event which has its centenary anniversary on 18th April 2006.