



Krakatoa

By Simon Winchester
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Introduction

The legendary annihilation in 1883 of the volcano-island of Krakatoa -- the name has since become a byword for a cataclysmic disaster -- was followed by an immense tsunami that killed nearly forty thousand people. Beyond the purely physical horrors of an event that has only very recently been properly understood, the eruption changed the world in more ways than could possibly be imagined.

Dust swirled round the planet for years, causing temperatures to plummet and sunsets to turn vivid with lurid and unsettling displays of light. The effects of the immense waves were felt as far away as France. Barometers in Bogotá and Washington, D.C., went haywire. Bodies were washed up in Zanzibar. The sound of the island's destruction was heard in Australia and India and on islands thousands of miles away. Most significant of all -- in view of today's new political climate -- the eruption helped to trigger in Java a wave of murderous anti-Western militancy among fundamentalist

Muslims: one of the first outbreaks of Islamic-inspired killings anywhere.

Simon Winchester's long experience in the world wandering, as well as his knowledge of history and geology, give us an entirely new perspective on this fascinating and iconic event.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss some of the many legends associated with the name Krakatoa (Carcata, Krakatau, Cacatoua). What does the name signify today?
2. Describe the cosmopolitan climate of the 17th century Dutch colony Batavia. How did that mood change in the 19th century, when Old Batavia was abandoned by Europeans who fled to Buitenzorg, the uptown suburb?
3. What important roles did Philip Sclater and Alfred Russel Wallace play in Darwin's theory of the origin of species and survival of the fittest? In the case of Wallace, did you feel that his role in history has been unduly neglected?
4. How did Alfred Wegener's theories about continental drift anticipate plate tectonic theory? How did the author's experiences in Greenland in 1965s further scientific understanding of these theories?
5. Discuss Krakatoa's eruptions prior to the catastrophic eruption in 1883. Did this historical background give you a more complete sense of Krakatoa as a living volcano? How do you think they compared in scope to the 1883 event?
6. Describe the beginnings of the 1883 eruption. What warnings did people in the region have that a major volcanic event was going to occur? How did the advent of transatlantic cables and telegraphs make this an international catastrophe?
7. Were you surprised by the duration of the 1883 Krakatoa event, from the earliest vibrations to the full eruption, some eight weeks later? What struck you about the many contemporary descriptions of this occurrence? How did some of the Javanese and Sumatrans make sense of this event?
8. Simon Winchester writes: "The death throes of Krakatoa lasted for exactly twenty hours and fifty-six minutes." What occurred during those hours? What part did the ocean play in the catastrophic destruction?
9. How did Krakatoa manage to transform the evening skies? How did the event alter the science of weather forecasting? The global climate?
10. How were tensions between Dutch colonists and the Muslim Javanese and Sumatran community exacerbated in the wake of the Krakatoa eruption?

About the author

Simon Winchester was a geologist at Oxford and worked in Africa and on offshore oil rigs before becoming a full-time globe-trotting foreign correspondent and writer. He is the author of *The Map that Changed the World*, *The Professor and the Madman*, and *The Fracture Zone*, among many other titles. He currently lives on a small farm in the Berkshires in Massachusetts and in the Western Isles of Scotland.