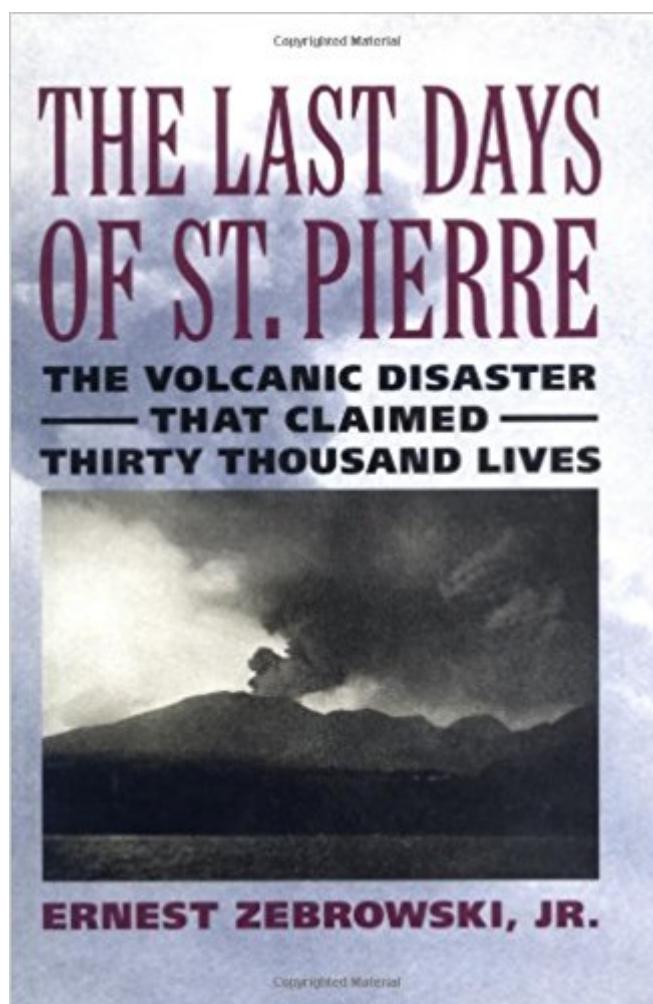


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# The Last Days Of St. Pierre: The Volcanic Disaster That Claimed 30,000 Lives



## Synopsis

On May 8, 1902, Mont Pelée on the island of Martinique exploded. A deadly cloud of steam and ash churned through plantations and villages, flattened the grand city of St. Pierre, then thundered into the bay where it sank eighteen ships and hundreds of smaller craft. Within a minute or two, nearly 30,000 humans died. The splintered rubble of their homes and belongings burned for three days, and the world began to understand the awesome power of *nuées ardentes*, glowing avalanches of hot gas and debris that sweep down the slopes of volcanoes, instantly steaming to death anything in its path. The enormous death toll was particularly tragic because it was avoidable. Had it not been for an unfortunate combination of scientific misjudgment and political hubris, most of the victims would have escaped. In *The Last Days of St. Pierre*, Ernest Zebrowski Jr. counts down the days leading up to the catastrophe, and unfolds a tale intertwining human foolishness and heroism with the remarkable forces of nature. Illustrations contrast life in Martinique before and after the eruption, and eyewitness accounts bring the story to life. Although it seems a long time since the destruction of St. Pierre, it is a mere blink of an eye in our planet's geological history. Mont Pelée will erupt again, as will Vesuvius, Krakatau, St. Helens, Thera, and most other infamously fatal volcanoes, and human lives will again be threatened. The St. Pierre disaster has taught us much about the awesome power of volcanic forces and the devastation they can bring.

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## Customer Reviews

The eruption of Mount Pele on the Caribbean island of Martinique in the spring of 1902 destroyed

the entire French West Indies city of St. Pierre. A hundred years later, natural disaster buff Zebrowski (*Perils of a Restless Planet*) has pulled together enough records to create a subtle though gripping account that combines powerful human drama (and tragedy) with a well-documented report of catastrophe in paradise. His account dwells on how easily the French bureaucratic order buckled like Walter Lord's *A Night To Remember* cast on an island fixed in a sea of cataclysms over the Atlantic Tectonic Plate. And like the *Titanic* disaster, this one came at just the moment when science (early seismometers were in place on the island) and undersea cable communications seemed capable of defending cities against forces of nature. Both St. Vincent's and Martinique suffered major volcanic eruptions in succession in April and May, but Zebrowski's premise that the colonial infrastructure of St. Pierre could have got many of the 30,000 who died out of the second volcano's way is somehow swept away by his own storytelling powers (his re-creation of the island governor's last cabinet meeting, for example). He is nearly as good as McPhee (*Annals of the Former World*) at making the earth move under the reader, and schadenfreude fans and historical disaster buffs will enjoy this one while perhaps in Paris some bureaucrat may yet be called to account. Illus. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

On May 8, 1902, Mont Pelee on the island of Martinique exploded. A vast cloud of superheated steam, ash, rocks, and debris descended on the port city of St. Pierre. In three or four minutes the entire population of the city, including many refugees from the surrounding countryside, died. The disaster attracted worldwide attention because it occurred in a prosperous French colony and was swiftly reported via telegraph. Numerous contemporary accounts, many ludicrously off the mark, attempted to describe the causes and effects of the eruption, but only with advances in volcanology over the last century have the real reasons for the explosion been largely explained. Mont Pelee was the first example of a pyroclastic surge to be examined by modern science, and observations there greatly assisted geologists in understanding volcanoes. Zebrowski (*A History of the Circle*) examines both the geologic situation and the social and political conditions that led the French authorities to concentrate as many people as possible in the path of certain death. This readable and entertaining popular history is well documented from French records, survivors' accounts, journalists, and scientific investigations. Highly recommended for public libraries and Caribbean collections. Edwin B. Burgess, U.S. Army Combined Arms Research Lib., Fort Leavenworth, KS  
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On the morning of May 8, 1902, a massive pyroclastic flow surged down the flank of Mt Pelee on

the island of Martinique in the French West Indies. The searing cloud slammed into the city of St Pierre; within two minutes, the city was a pile of smoking rubble and 30,000 people were dead. Asked to name the greatest volcanic disasters in history, most people would probably offer up Mt Vesuvius and the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum; they might also volunteer the explosion of Krakatoa or the even more recent eruption of Mt. St Helens. Mt Pelee and St Pierre are usually only vaguely recalled, which is remarkable given the sheer size of the human tragedy. Zebrowski's book does a marvelous job of taking the reader back to 1902, when scientists understood far less than they do now about what volcanos can do. The series of eruptions at Mt Pelee were triggered by the rise of a huge bulge of magma from the subduction zone beneath the Lesser Antilles. These forces set off Mt La Soufriere on the island of St Vincent, where pyroclastic flows and lahars killed two thousand people the day before St Pierre was destroyed; the rising magma also erupted in an undersea volcano at a spot called Kick 'em Jenny. Zebrowski describes the weeks leading to the eruption of Mt Pelee and how the local inhabitants and French bureaucracy struggled to understand what they were up against. The blame for the disaster is often laid at the feet of Louis Mouttet, the governor of Martinique, but it is difficult to imagine what else he could have done. At the time, scientists thought of volcanic eruptions in terms of slow moving rivers of lava rather than swift and deadly pyroclastic flows and lahars. If Mouttet had tried to evacuate St. Pierre, he would have had very little support; even if he had succeeded, he would have created an enormous refugee crisis. Zebrowski explains what life in St Pierre was like before the disaster, how Martinique's inhabitants coped with the increasingly dangerous volcano in their midst, what happened to the city and its people when the volcano erupted and afterward, how the French government handled (or failed to handle) the aftermath of the disaster, and how a courageous group of scientists and journalists explored the still-erupting volcano to understand what had happened. Zebrowski has chosen a rich canvas for a gripping tale, and he makes the most of it in this well-written book.

This was an interesting book. This seems to be one of the biggest tragedies that nobody has ever heard about. Over 30,000 people killed in seconds. There has not been a lot of books written about this disaster simply because the whole town of St. Pierre was wiped out and with only one survivor (a prisoner in solitary confinement), there were no witnesses. Given this fact, I was wondering how Mr. Zebrowski was going to put this together. In my opinion, he did a very good job and I would recommend this book to anybody who wants to read about that terrible day in May, 1902.

This review is unusual in that it compares two books that were published nearly at the same time and both deal with the same event: the devastating 1902 eruption of Montagne Pelée volcano on the Caribbean island of Martinique. The first of these books is Alwyn Scarth's "LA Catastrophe: The Eruption of Mount Pelée, the Worst Volcanic Disaster of the 20th Century", the second is Ernest Zebrowski's "The Last Days of St. Pierre: The Volcanic Disaster that Claimed 30,000 Lives", published just four months earlier. Both books mark the 100th anniversary of the eruption that virtually exterminated the town of Saint-Pierre along with nearly all of its inhabitants. Both fulfill an important mission: putting an end to the incredible amount and degree of misinformation veiling that tragic event to the present day.

The 1902 Montagne Pelée (commonly translated into Mount Pelée in the English literature) eruption produced a phenomenon called pyroclastic flows (and/or surges), which had until then not been recognized by geologists - although today we know that they occur quite frequently. Just as I write this review (early February 2006), pyroclastic flows are spilling down the slopes of Mount St. Augustine volcano in Alaska. They were produced by nearly all the famous explosive eruptions in history, including Mount St. Helens (1980), Pinatubo (1991), Krakatau (1883), and Vesuvius (79 A.D.). However, there was no common conscience of pyroclastic flows among scientists and people living on volcanoes in early 1902, when Montagne Pelée stirred and gradually came back to life. What was known at the time about volcanoes was limited to lava flows, ash falls, and tsunamis (the latter are rarely caused by volcanic eruptions). Often, eruptions were confused with earthquakes (which are a completely different geological process). So people in Saint-Pierre most worried about such things, and they had no means to know that Montagne Pelée held something else in store for them.

Many accounts about the 1902 events on Martinique blamed Governor Mouttet for the death of about 28,000 people in the eruption. Some writers accused him even to have posted troops on the roads exiting the threatened town to prevent the inhabitants from evacuating. Just the fact that Mouttet went to stay in Saint-Pierre the night before the tragic eruption says enough - he did not know, and there was no way of knowing, that the volcano would unleash a deadly pyroclastic flow the next morning.

Both Scarth and Zebrowski spend a lot of words and reasoning to clean the memory of Mouttet from these unjustified accusations. They do a lot of similar work concerning the vast amounts of contorted or false information regarding many other aspects of the 1902 events. There are, however, some significant differences between these two books. Scarth has looked much more profoundly into the French sources of information, which Zebrowski - he himself admits in the introduction to his book that he is not too familiar with French - has done to a much lesser degree. Scarth's slightly higher degree of scrutiny does lead to a more precise result, which goes from the correct spelling of names (e.g., Mouttet's

followup governor, whose correct name - as given by Scarth - was Lhuerre, not L'heurre as in Zebrowski) to the numbers of victims of the 1902 events: there were actually three eruptions in that year in the Caribbean that killed each more than 1000 people. The first, on 7 May 1902, occurred on the island of St. Vincent, where the Soufrière volcano killed some 1560; only 18 hours later, Montagne Pelée snuffed out some 27,000 souls, and the same volcano killed another 1200 on 30 August that year. These numbers are those most likely to represent the real death toll - which is quite a few thousand less than those numbered by Zebrowski. Some of the most accurate scientific accounts of those events are cited in Zebrowski's bibliographic list but little of their information is used in his book. This is most notable in the case of T. Anderson and J. Flett (1903), who wrote a harrowing tale of the Soufrière (St. Vincent) eruption and witnessed one of the major eruptions of Montagne Pelée in July 1902. Interestingly, the most prominent scientist studying Montagne Pelée and its activity in that period was the French professor A. Lacroix, who is mentioned relatively briefly in Zebrowski's book. His monumental monograph "La Montagne Pelée et ses Éruptions" (1904) is not even included in the bibliography, which does, however, refer to the less known and somewhat controversial "La Montagne Pelée après ses Éruptions", published by Lacroix in 1908. We find less errors of this kind in Scarth's book. This is partly due to the fact that Scarth has close relationships to volcanologists who have worked, and are working, on the 1902 Montagne Pelée eruption and its effects. Some of them are French. I am certain that Scarth has indeed read through at least large portions of Lacroix' "La Montagne Pelée et ses Éruptions". I know that book fairly well. It does not very much deal with the political and social turmoils preceding and following the eruption. But as for details concerning the eruption itself, and its tremendous effects on human beings and their environment, this is one of the most thrilling things to read - if one is familiar with French. Unfortunately, this makes it quite unaccessible to non-French readers, besides the fact that it is extremely difficult to find (France has a used copy "in correct state" offered for 995 Euros - more than 1000 US\$)... Without being too critical about the somewhat higher amount of flaws in Zebrowski's book, I find that in the end both Zebrowski and Scarth are definitely worth a read, also because they deal with very different details - so there is not all that much of a repetition there. Both do a precious effort to put things about the 1902 events into the right perspective. I hope that they will help to diminish the vast amount of misinformation currently in circulation. Catania (Sicily, Italy), 3 February 2006

I have read 2 books on this subject now plus numerous articles from newspapers of the time that have been made available online. The reason for the interest is that my grandfather was serving on

a Royal Navy warship that was sent in to assist in some way at the time of the eruption. We never new the name of the ship or exactly what it did. This book is the only place that I have actually seen a mention of Royal Navy vessel. A big thank you to the author for including this information in the book. Had that vessel not left when it did, my mother would not have been born in October 1903 and I would not be writing this. The book is well written in an easy style with quite a lot of reasonable deductions made from the bald facts available and includes statements made by quite a lot of survivors together with letters to relatives which linked the narrative together. Hindsight is a wonderful thing and blame is often conveniently attributed to the wrong person(s). The author treats this subject very sensitively arguing reasonably for all parties given the terrible circumstances and poor/broken communications. Excellent read if you are interested in volcanoes, history or human experience.

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