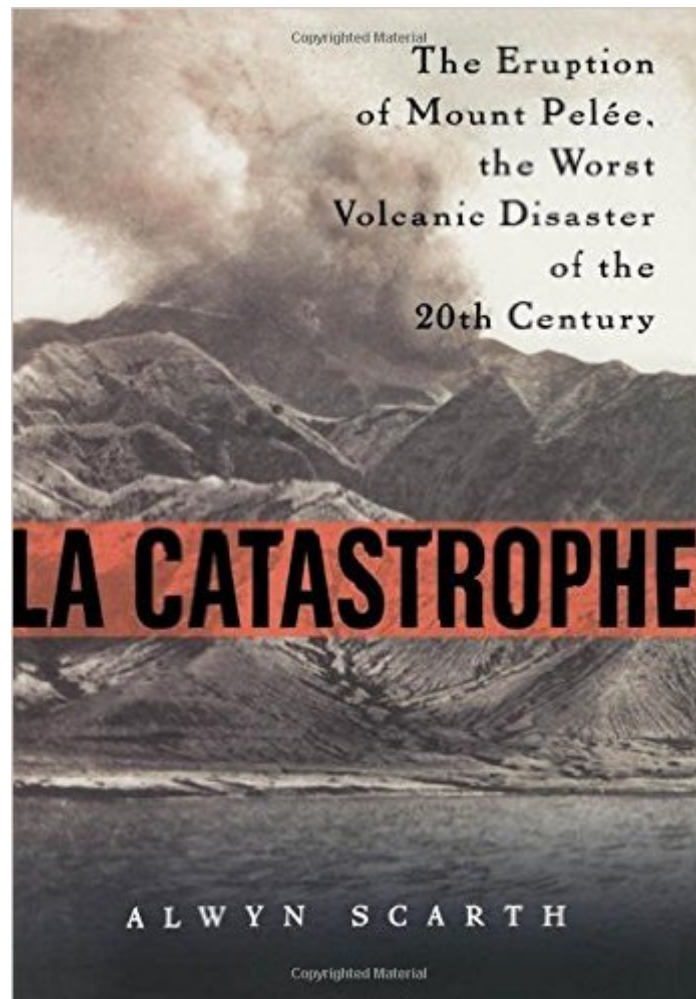


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# La Catastrophe: The Eruption Of Mount Pelee, The Worst Volcanic Disaster Of The 20th Century



## 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.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 256 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (June 22, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195218396

ISBN-13: 978-0195218398

Product Dimensions: 9.3 x 0.7 x 6.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (10 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,312,565 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #72 in [Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Geology > Volcanology](#) #814 in [Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Natural Disasters](#) #1244 in [Books > History > Americas > Caribbean & West Indies](#)

## Customer Reviews

It seems there has been a lot of attention focused on the 1902 eruption of Mount Pelee and its destruction of Saint-Pierre recently, and this book stands out as a wonderful account of the events surrounding it. Alwyn Scarth is an exceptionally literate writer and provides a very frank and objective analysis of the events before and after the eruption as well as copious detail on the eruption itself. His writing style is dry at times, but it is enhanced by the occasional wry humor and his portraits of the people of Martinique, especially those of Father Mary and the captain of the cruiser Suchet. Scarth presents a great number of original documents from a variety of sources (sometimes providing photos of originals such as French naval telegrams), and provides as many eyewitness accounts as possible. Although the eruption of Pelee is the subject of the book, Scarth spends a comparable amount of time on the society of Saint-Pierre and Martinique, particularly the apartheid-based social structure and contentious politics of the colony. He also makes an admirable attempt to show that past accounts that accuse Governor Mouttet of forcing citizens to stay in Saint-Pierre to vote are groundless, and he recounts the political arrogance of the post-eruption administration. Scarth also refutes several myths about the eruption, especially the belief that Louis-Auguste Sylbaris was the sole survivor and that 30,000 people or more were killed (the likely number is several thousand fewer). He presents Saint-Pierre as a busy and modern colonial city, but vehemently disagrees with any romantic notions of a "Paris of the East Indies."

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) 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).

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