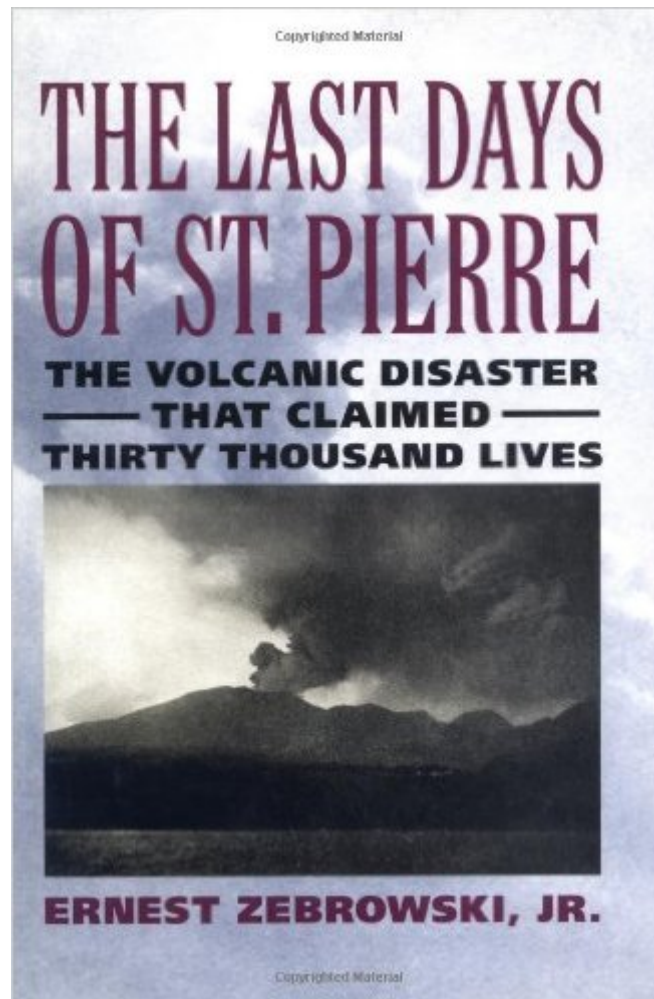


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The Last Days Of St. Pierre: The Volcanic Disaster That Claimed 30,000 Lives



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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).

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