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Krakatoa: A Worldwide Interruption from the Greatest Eruption

In the novel *Krakatoa* by Simon Winchester, the effects of one of the world’s largest natural disasters were evaluated. Coined as the notorious “fire mountain”, the island of Krakatoa became famous for its explosion and widespread outcomes (p. 121). While its immediate effects appear devastating for Java and its surrounding areas, the explosion of Krakatoa on August 27, 1883 impacted the world in many prosperous ways. Across the globe, individuals witnessed and experienced the explosion through varying experiences. From short term effects on atmospheric conditions to advancements in science and religion, the explosion of Krakatoa became a global event.

From literal shocks waves and sounds traveling across the world to the birth of new technologies following the explosion, Krakatoa truly defines a natural global event. Winchester claims that Krakatoa was the “greatest sound ever experienced by man” where “13 percent of the earth’s surface vibrated audibly (p. 264). While its explosion occurred in a remote, isolated place in the world, its impacts spread worldwide causing many changes not only in nature, but also in technology and religion. Throughout *Krakatoa*, Simon Winchester incorporates viewpoints and experiences of people across the globe in order to prove that the world “exploded” metaphorically as the volcano itself exploded literally.

The development of the telegraph and the expansion of transmitting information during the time of Krakatoa’s explosion impacted the way people across the world heard and experienced the natural disaster. In 1856, the electric telegraph was brought to the Indies, “[playing] a crucial role in the spreading of the story of Krakatoa” (p. 142). With connections to Singapore, the Malay States, and Australia, information regarding the explosion became easily accessible. In the case of Krakatoa, a London-based ship insurance company, the Society of Lloyd’s, played a major role in the distribution of information following the explosion. The organization hired Mr. Schuit to essentially “collect [and] transmit to the Corporation information of likely interest to the Lloyd’s market and insurers worldwide” (p. 179). Mr Schuit was inevitably forced with a job that did not necessarily fit this description; he eventually sent one of the first messages about the actions of the explosion. Without the development of this technology prior to Krakatoa, news of the event would have never been able to reach Europe or other parts of world in a fast manner. According to Winchester, “it took an event like Krakatoa’s eruption...to underline the real revolution that this new technology was visiting upon the planet” (p. 182). The information sent out about Krakatoa’s explosion revolutionized the power of the telegraph and the importance of the information as a whole. With access to this information, people worldwide experienced the explosion on their own personal standpoints, something that the world had not experienced to this extent at this point in history.

Prior to the explosion, there had not been a natural disaster that affected the weather or practice of meteorology such as Krakatoa. The unusual occurrences of light sightings, dust clouds, and shock waves worldwide pushed scientists to discover if the explosion had been the cause of these various experiences. Reports of bizarre coloration in the sky and a dusty “cloud” spread throughout Europe, Asia, and even the United States. According to Winchester, studies of these phenomena “turned out to be quite crucial for modern meteorology” (p. 287). Universities worldwide began researching Krakatoa in order to expand their knowledge on its effects of weather forecasting and meteorology. Winchester compares their research to our modern-day knowledge of jetstream patterns. He states, “it was the study of the stratospheric movement of the Krakatoa aerosols that led to the understanding of this particular weather-making phenomenon” (p. 288). While the explosion did include devastating geological impacts on Java and its surrounding areas, Krakatoa helped establish many common practices of meteorology that are still used today. These advancements in weather technology are living proof of the beneficial impacts of the Krakatoa volcano, experienced by many people across the globe both then and now.

Extending beyond the advancements in communication and scientific technology, the Krakatoa explosion impacted the Islamic faith immensely. Many Batavians and individuals from surrounding areas correlated the explosion of Krakatoa to the arrival of their god, Mahdi. In their teachings, it was believed that their god would come as their savior if “There would be diseases of cattle. There would be floods. There would be blood-colored rain. And volcanoes would erupt, and people would die” (p. 331). With all of these events coincidentally occurring after the eruption, it was nearly impossible to not believe in the arrival of Mahdi. With an uplifting sense of security and strength from their faith, Muslims in the surrounding areas began feeling rebellious against the westerners occupying their land. It is not surprising that their religious feelings led to several “Islamic-inspired, Islamic-led” rebellions that took place following the eruption (p. 334). In many ways, the Islamic faith in this area transformed from a religious to a political platform, changing the way individuals in the East Indies felt about the explosion, their faith, and most importantly, their feelings toward the Westerners. As stated by Winchester, “Islam was coming under an increasing threat from Western imperialism” and fighting back was the way East Indie Muslims would gain control over their religion (p. 329). Their resistance to Western control not only proved the strength of their Islamic faith, but also the negative effects of imperialism in these areas as a result of Krakatoa. Worldwide, but specifically in Europe and the Americas, people took notice of the spread of Islam and Dutch control in the areas surrounding the explosion. The Muslims in the East Indies were ready for reform in their land and their religion.

While the explosion of Krakatoa led to drastic geological changes in the areas around it, the volcano’s impacts spread internationally in ways people would have never imagined. The world truly “exploded” alongside Krakatoa with advancements in technology, science, and religion. In the quote “civilization exists by geologic consent, subject to change without notice”, the impacts of Krakatoa’s eruption are perfectly related to changes in human life following August 27, 1883 (p. 298). Had Krakatoa never exploded, immense changes for the advancement of human society worldwide could have been different, further impacting the world today as we know it.

Bibliography

Winchester, Simon. *Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded*. London: Viking, 2005.