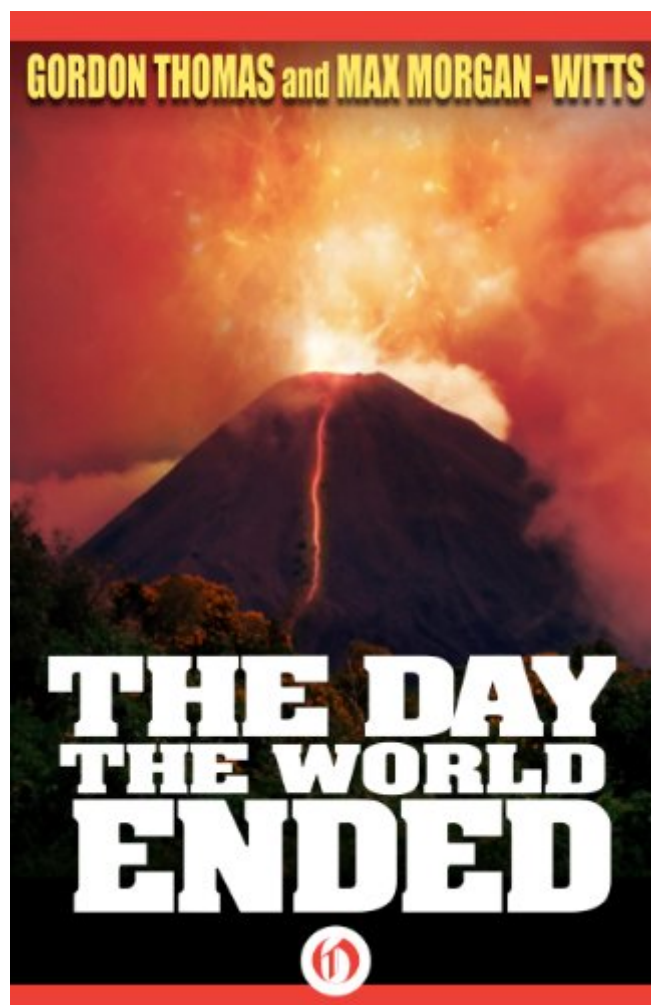


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# The Day The World Ended: Mont Pelee Earthquake, 1902



## Synopsis

The compelling true story of the most lethal natural disaster in the western hemisphere from Edgar Award-nominated authors Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan-Witts. In late April 1902, Mount Pelée, a volcano on the Caribbean island Martinique, began to wake up. It emitted clouds of ash and smoke for two weeks until violently erupting on May 8. Over 30,000 residents of St. Pierre were killed; they burned to death under rivers of hot lava and suffocated under pounds of hot ash. Only three people managed to survive: a prisoner trapped in a dungeon-like jail cell, a man on the outskirts of town, and a young girl found floating unconscious in a boat days later. So how did a town of thousands not heed the warnings of nature and local scientists, instead staying behind to perish in the onslaught of volcanic ash? Why did the newspapers publish articles assuring readers that the volcano was harmless? And why did the authorities refuse to allow the American Consul to contact Washington about the conditions? The answer lies in politics: With an election on the horizon, the political leaders of Martinique ignored the welfare of their people in order to consolidate the votes they needed to win. A gripping and informative book on the disastrous effects of a natural disaster coupled with corruption, *The Day the World Ended* reveals the story of a city engulfed in flames and the political leaders that chose to kill their people rather than give up their political power.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The subject matter--the 1902 volcanic decimation of the most important city on the Caribbean island of Martinique--is compelling. Indeed, I have been so fascinated by it that I have read everything I can find on the subject. The trouble with this particular accounting is that it emphasizes political selfishness and plotting, long thought to have unnecessarily entrapped the 30,000-odd victims in the doomed city. That view of the disaster--ascribing cruel indifference to persons no longer alive to explain their actions--was itself politically generated after the event, and has been subsequently thoroughly discredited. Indeed, the Island's governor is now perceived as having been a deeply concerned and brave man who tried to do what was best for his island and himself perished in the process. This book was simply written before the political and social circumstances of the event were well understood. Because the authors chose to emphasize the social aspect of the tragedy--and relied in so doing upon a long-standing, purposefully generated misrepresentation based in inaccuracy and innuendo--the volume is simply grossly misleading. Read any one of the fine books written in the past fifteen years or so. You'll come away with a much truer sense of what actually happened in and to St. Pierre, and an understanding of how a lack of scientific knowledge--despite the best efforts of the island's best and brightest--brought about a compelling and fascinating disaster at the start of the last century.

To me this review does not do justice to the most compelling aspect of the book, which is how political pressure, and assurances of safety in the face of all evidence to the contrary, by governmental officials and other trusted leaders dissuaded the people of St. Pierre from evacuating the city in time to save their lives. I read this book many years ago and have forgotten some of the details, but this theme -- more popularly explored in "Jaws" and recently in "Isaac's Storm" -- has stayed in my mind. Most readers will never be threatened by a volcanic eruption, but this book is a somewhat grim reminder that our own leaders may be lying about impending natural disasters. Remember Pelee!

Considering that more than 30,000 people died, and that it happened in the 20th century, you'd think Mt. Pelee's eruption would be more famous. Anyway, this book, one of the very few I know of that is entirely about this incident, is a fascinating look into the lives of people on a peaceful

Caribbean island and a horrifying account of Pelee's awakening and the catastrophe that gave its name to a whole class of volcanic eruptions. I literally could not stop reading until I finished it.

For fast-paced excitement, you cannot beat *The Day the World Ended*, which is a day-by-day account of the 1902 volcano, starting on the 2nd of May 1902 and ending on the 8th, that weaves into this time several strong human interest stories. It was written in 1969, 67 years after the eruption, when the authors could still find a few people close to those times to interview. I get the feeling it was based very much on interviews, which gives it an immediacy not as apparent in the other two books: *The Last Days of St. Pierre* by Ernest Zebrowski and *La Catastrophe* by Alwyn Scarth. If you can only read one book, make it this one. It reads like a novel. The cost of this approach is that we cannot be sure all the stories the authors heard were accurate, so we will never know if some of the stories told here, like the placing of troops to stop people leaving the town are true. But for a feeling of impending doom, this book creates the atmosphere perfectly.

Thomas and Witts give us the play by play account of Mount Pelee's devastating eruption on May 8th, 1902. They draw from existing eyewitness accounts, personal interviews, and surviving documents to recreate the horror of the tragedy, and create sympathetic portraits of the individuals caught up in the cataclysm of the devastated city of St. Pierre, once called the Paris of the West Indies. They take the standard position that Governor Louis Mouttet was suffering from some sort of mental instability, a narrative that was supported by survivor Edouard L'Heurre, the Governor's Secretary, that later authors such as Ernest Zebrowski refute by using scientific logic and deduction. Recreating the events of May, 1902 A thrilling, suspenseful real-life tragedy that claimed 30,000 lives, the eruption of Mount Pelee is a story that, like a sleeping volcano, refuses to lie dormant.

Such an interesting event. So boringly told. The completely unnecessary deep dive into the politics rather than more anecdotes about the people make this book boring and bogged-down. I almost forgot there was a volcano erupting. This book could be much shorter and more interesting. A waste of money and extremely disappointing.

I read this book back in the 60s when it first came out and remembered it to this day. We are going to visit Martinique this year so I decided to buy it for my Kindle and read it again. I'm looking forward to seeing St. Pierre and the museum there. Anyone who likes the Caribbean islands will enjoy reading this little piece of history.

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