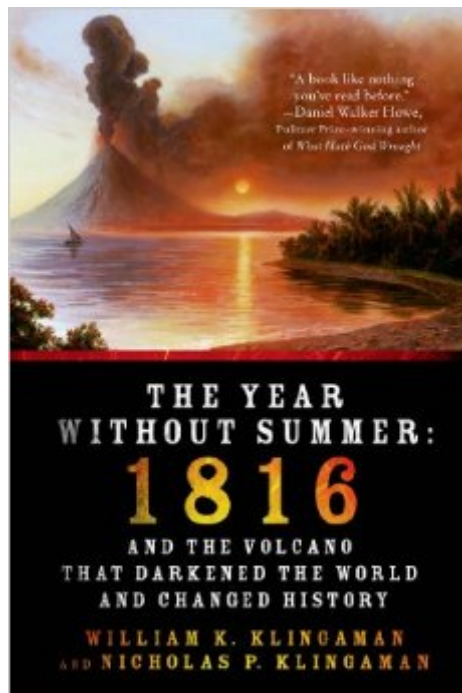


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The Year Without Summer: 1816 And The Volcano That Darkened The World And Changed History



Synopsis

Like Winchester's *Krakatoa, The Year Without Summer* reveals a year of dramatic global change long forgotten by history. In the tradition of *Krakatoa, The World Without Us*, and *Guns, Germs and Steel* comes a sweeping history of the year that became known as 18-hundred-and-froze-to-death. 1816 was a remarkable year—mostly for the fact that there was no summer. As a result of a volcanic eruption at Mount Tambora in Indonesia, weather patterns were disrupted worldwide for months, allowing for excessive rain, frost, and snowfall through much of the Northeastern U.S. and Europe in the summer of 1816. In the U.S., the extraordinary weather produced food shortages, religious revivals, and extensive migration from New England to the Midwest. In Europe, the cold and wet summer led to famine, food riots, the transformation of stable communities into wandering beggars, and one of the worst typhus epidemics in history. 1816 was the year *Frankenstein* was written. It was also the year Turner painted his fiery sunsets. All of these things are linked to global climate change—something we are quite aware of now, but that was utterly mysterious to people in the nineteenth century, who concocted all sorts of reasons for such an ungenial season. Making use of a wealth of source material and employing a compelling narrative approach featuring peasants and royalty, politicians, writers, and scientists, *The Year Without Summer* by William K. Klingaman and Nicholas P. Klingaman examines not only the climate change engendered by the volcano, but also its effects on politics, the economy, the arts, and social structures.

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Customer Reviews

On April 5, 1815, the volcano Tambora on the island of Sumbawa began to erupt, culminating in a

massive explosion on April 11-12. This event was the largest known volcanic eruption in the last 2,000 years, 100 times more powerful than Mt. St Helens in 1980, and 10 times as strong as the famous eruption of Krakatau in 1883. The blast pushed an estimated 55 million tons of sulphur dioxide gas into the atmosphere, producing a fine aerosol that blocked the sun and lowered temperatures around the world. Europe and the Northeast United States began to feel the effects of Mt. Tambora's eruption almost a year later in 1816, when its impact on the atmosphere and the jet stream began to change the weather. The late spring and early summer of that year were extremely cold, with snow and ice appearing as late as June. The summer and the growing seasons were also very short, as the cold weather resumed in August and September. In that era, few people had any idea that a volcanic eruption could lower global temperatures, although Benjamin Franklin suspected as much after observing the effects that an eruption of the Icelandic volcano Laki had on Europe in 1783. Speculation in America and Europe was rife as to whether the cold weather foretold a coming judgment day, or whether sunspots meant that the sun was radiating less heat, or whether perhaps the sun was simply burning out. Even those who did not fear an apocalypse did not know how long the bad weather would last. Set against the cold weather that the volcano put in motion is the human story of 1816. "The Year Without a Summer" explains what happened in, among other countries, France, where the government of a newly restored King Louis XVIII tried to manage the unrest caused by crop failure; Britain, where the government declined to help the poor of England or the starving citizens of Ireland; New England and Virginia, where the cold weather and resulting crop failures triggered waves of emigration to the Ohio Valley and other points west; and Switzerland, the hardest hit European country, where starvation was rampant and 1816-17 became known as the "Hungerjahre." William Klingaman is the author of several other well-received books about important years in history: 1919 The Year Our World Began, 1929: The Year of the Great Crash, and 1941: Our Lives in a World on the Edge. His co-author, Nicholas Klingaman, is a meteorologist at the University of Reading. The two authors have done an excellent job of combining their talents to produce a narrative that captures the life and times of 1816 and the years around it, as well as the volcano-induced weather catastrophe that turned those times upside down. The book offers a lot of interesting digressions along paths as diverse as the discovery and observation of sunspots, the final fall of Napoleon Bonaparte, the career of future British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, the legacy of President James Madison, 19th century agriculture, the American presidential and congressional elections of 1816, and the genesis, on the dark, rainy shores of Lake Geneva, of Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" and John Polidori's "The Vampyre" (the latter is less well known than Shelley's famous work, but ultimately inspired Bram Stoker's

"Dracula") All in all, "The Year Without Summer" was a very enjoyable and informative read that reminded me of "Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded: August 27, 1883" (though the story arc is a bit reversed: "The Year Without Summer" devotes only its opening chapter to the volcanic eruption that sets the events of 1816 in motion, while Winchester's work tends to build toward the volcanic eruption itself). If the subject of "The Year Without Summer" interests you, you might also enjoy "Volcanoes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Major Eruptions", another excellent book that describes the remarkable and often surprising effects that volcanoes have had on human affairs.

This book presents a good historical narrative of the volcanic eruption of Mt. Tambora in Indonesia in late 1815 and the consequences the following summer. The weather pattern at the time caused the volcanic particles to remain in the atmosphere rather than fall with the rain over the Pacific. The result was less sunlight in New England and Western Europe. New England was very cold and dry the summer of 1816 with snow in June. The major impact was that the crops failed and the bad weather continued into 1817. Many farm families moved out of the Northeast and migrated to Ohio, Penn., and Indiana. The introduction of oatmeal as a staple food was related as wheat and corn became scarce. Western Europe saw cold, wet, damp conditions and their crops rotted in the fields. England passed the first of the welfare laws to alleviate the starving poor while many (3,000) fled Ireland to the United States. France also had to deal with political unrest due to the many destitute that revolted against the high cost of bread. The first hundred pages allow the reader to appreciate the impact of a volcanic eruption has on global climate. The author does repeat often the weather conditions a bit too much (April was cold, May cold, June still cold) which may cause some readers to browse the middle of the book. Sometimes the narrative gets off topic (the Byron-Shelley story) so after reading the book (279 pages) one gets that there was padding to reach the page count. The final rating should be 3.5 stars as the true core of the book would clock in at about 200 pages. However, the main impetus of the book succeeds where it should, allowing the reader to better understand 1816—the year without a summer.

All of us probably check the daily weather forecast to see how it will affect our plans. In fact, the weather portion of televised news is typically the highest rated segment, so much so that it now has its own channels and websites worldwide. And, like me, you likely know or suspect this is so. What I didn't know are some of the underlying causes for these atmospheric changes and the unintended consequences on macro as well as up-close-and-personal levels. William K. and Nicholas P.

Klingamans' collaborative work, "The Year Without Summer: 1816 and the Volcano that Darkened the World and Changed History," is a remarkable exploration and portrait of how the weather can be affected by an unexpected event and literally the subsequent fall out on the course of human events. The triggering event for this journey is the April 1815 colossal eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia. The blast was heard more than 900 miles away in Java by lieutenant-governor Thomas Stafford Raffles (in 1819 to be involved with the founding of the City and Colony of Singapore). Local British naval commanders explored the source of the noise and discovered days at noon that were pitch black with the smoke from the eruption and seas choked full for up to three miles with volcanic pumice. Little did they know then that the soot, ash and particularly the sulphur plumes had blasted through the troposphere into the stratosphere, or highest level of the atmosphere, to combine with water and form a sulphuric acid aerosol cloud that would circulate around the globe driven by the "polar vortex" winds and within a year reflect back sunlight to cool parts of the Earth in more temperate zones. It is now 1816 and this is where the story really takes off: the War of 1812 for the Americans has ended; the British under Wellington have defeated Napoleon at Waterloo and exiled him to Saint Helena; the French are still struggling to realize a government based on republican or monarchy concepts; most of the underprivileged and poor in Ireland, France and other parts of Europe are just barely making ends meet; Jane Austen is writing "Emma", Shelley Bysshe Shelley penning "Mont Blanc" and traveling in Europe with Mary Godwin - soon to be telling her own tale, "Frankenstein" - and George Gordon Byron completing "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" and "The Prisoner of Chillon" epic poems. A dynamic canvas against which tumultuous events will rapidly unfold. Through painstaking collection of local almanacs, diary entries, newspaper articles, legislative records and other histories the Klingamans have woven the threads into a tapestry depicting the unexpected impact of sustained cold, rain, flooding, wide crop failures and unprepared governments on lives from the very rich to the very poor - as if it were today. They follow the story lines through to 1817 and beyond on the broad social and selected personal themes. If there is any criticism it might be with the repetition of some of the weather descriptions though, I suspect, this is by design: to draw us into the world as the people were living it then. It is a very different and refreshing approach to history - through the lens of meteorology. One of the principles of Chaos Theory is called the "Butterfly Effect," which essentially posits that small changes in the initial conditions lead to drastic changes in the results. Had a butterfly not flapped its wings at just the right point in space and time, say, a Brazilian jungle, would a hurricane in China have not occurred? Might the same be said about the debated causes of global warming today - except that some of these are man-made so the consequences may not be so arbitrary...

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