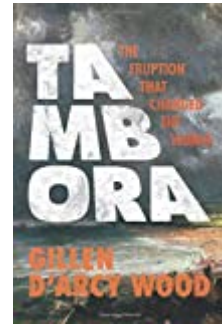




Gillen D'Arcy Wood. *Tambora: The Eruption That Changed the World.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. 312 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-15054-3.



Reviewed by Jonathan Abel (University of North Texas)

Published on H-War (May, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Gillen D'Arcy Wood's *Tambora: The Eruption that Changed the World* examines the April 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora. Wood intricately weaves literary works, scientific data, and anecdotal evidence to create a gripping account of the worldwide event and the "Year without a Summer" that followed in 1816. He argues that this event was a world-changing cataclysm with significant impacts in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The work is therefore a hybrid of environmental history and a history of memory, with a strongly literary bent.

Wood begins his narrative with the form of much of the work, using contemporary accounts and scientific data to examine the eruption and its effects on the surrounding area, the "Pompeii of the East." He notes the devastation wrought upon the Sumbawan villages around Tambora as they were consumed by the eruption. However, this was only the beginning of the disaster. The large volume of volcanic matter ejected by Tambora spread across the atmosphere, eventually drifting around the planet over the next months. This produced the "Year without a Summer" across much of the planet. Wood details how temperatures fell by as much as a degree and a half on the Fahrenheit scale. Such a drop disrupted climates, in many cases severely. Northern Europe and America saw increased cloud cover, rain, and

storms. This led to widespread crop failures as the harvests were drowned by the increased rainfall and crops refused to sprout in the cooler temperatures. The Swiss Alps experienced glacial flooding as a result. Perhaps the most devastated area was Asia. Wood argues that the Tambora eruption led in part to the great cholera outbreak of 1816-26 in India, which spread to the rest of the continent and world. It also led to Asian crop failures, particularly, as Wood notes, in the burgeoning agricultural economy of Yunnan.

Wood's work is at its best in describing these events and their effects. The bulk of its text is dedicated to expositions of case studies. He charts the disruption of the monsoon season and subsequent cholera epidemic in Bengal. He journeys to Ireland and its crop failures, resulting in the "First potato famine." He records the breathless enthusiasm of budding scientists in the Arctic and the Swiss Alps. Each case reads as a breakaway tale from the larger narrative. Wood dives deeply into contemporary sources, chiefly anecdotal observations, to record the devastation wrought by Tambora's climatic effects. These breathe life into the intensely human drama that played out as people suffered its effects from Ireland to China. They include a wealth of scientific data cited from relevant studies from a variety of disciplines.

Woven into each of these chapters are passages from contemporary literature. Most prevalent are the works of the "Shelley circle," British writers associated with Percy and Mary Shelley. Wood liberally uses dramatic quotations from their works, including the poetry of Shelley and Lord Byron and oft-quoted passages of *Frankenstein*. This analysis clearly illustrates Wood's background in nineteenth-century literature. He argues that the impact of the Tambora cataclysm produced a persistent image within the memory of those who experienced it. They included elements of the aftermath, particularly the strange and often apocalyptic weather, in their works. Wood makes a convincing case that this climate change generated many of the ideas that produced both vampire and Frankenstein literature during and after the period.

Wood also devotes much of the chapter on Yunnan to a literary criticism of the poetry of Li Yuyang, previously unavailable to Anglophone readers. Li chronicles the failure of the harvest in Yunnan and the subsequent economic and human disaster in heartrending detail. These passages serve to create a poignant and effective history of memory. Wood makes a persuasive argument for the enormous impact of the Tambora event on memory and culture. His many examples from period literature serve to drive this point home. Taken as a whole, this history of memory is one of the work's strong points.

Wood's work suffers somewhat from its broad geographic reach and interdisciplinary approach. Its many chapters on far-flung regions whose climates were influenced by Tambora's climate change provide little depth to each area's story. For example, he does not question if the multiyear effects of the Tambora disaster were different from the normal cyclical crop failures that plagued

Europe before and during the period, most notably the one that led to a spike in bread prices on July 14, 1789.

The heavy emphasis on literary accounts throughout the work also detracts from its stated purpose of being a work of environmental history. In his chapter on Yunnan, Wood notes that "one of the many bureaucratic and intellectual achievements of China's two-thousand-year empire is its meteorological record keeping, which surpassed that of any other nation in historical reach and detail" (pp. 97-98). He then fails to utilize these sources, relying instead on poetry and "a British emissary on-board a ship bound for Canton" for his quoted sources in much of the chapter (p. 97). This lack of historical and archival evidence is most glaring in the Yunnan chapter but is present to a lesser degree throughout the narrative. As a work of environmental history, *Tambora* would benefit from many more historical citations in place of the numerous quotations from literature, particularly the aforementioned but never cited Chinese records.

Wood's work is an excellent history of memory of the Tambora explosion and its effects on global and local climates. His case is both dramatic and effective in that regard. It is also an excellently written work of environmental history, particularly in its inclusion of scientific data and explanations of a number of relevant climatological and volcanological phenomena, which situate it well within the current historiography of climate change. Its historical methodology, however, suffers from an emphasis on literary rather than historical and historiographical evidence. Despite this minor caveat, Wood's *Tambora* is a highly recommended and welcome addition to the historiographical fields of memory and environmental history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Jonathan Abel. Review of D'Arcy Wood, Gillen, *Tambora: The Eruption That Changed the World*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43655>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.