

Grumbly. Grumblyings from an Ashen Island

by Jeremy Lennard
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While residents of Montserrat stoically endure the explosions of a volcano, they are restless over political eruptions that hinder crisis management

Back in early August an uncanny silence fell over the tiny Caribbean island of Montserrat. Birds stopped singing, dogs ceased barking, and the incessant chirping of insects died away. The silence on this British dependent territory was filled by a deep and ominous rumble.

Within seconds the rumble became a thunderous roar—something akin to a Boeing 747 hauling itself into the air—and the Soufrière Hills Volcano belched a plume of steam and ash tens of thousands of feet into the azure sky. As the mushroom cloud dispersed, the sun was blotted out for fifteen minutes, and ash and pumice pebbles up to an inch in diameter rained down on two-thirds of the forty-square-mile island. Locals watched the destructive beauty of the eruption with cardboard boxes over their heads to protect themselves from the abrasive deluge. “It is a privilege to witness this,” said Alfonsus “Arrow” Cassell, Montserrat’s

leading calypso musician. "A vicious and deadly privilege."

The volcano awoke for the first time in four centuries back in July 1995. It has been erupting sporadically ever since, forcing thousands to abandon their homes. Montserrat's population has dropped from twelve thousand to five thousand in the past two years, but it was not until the past summer that the mountain claimed its first lives. On June 25 Soufrière sent rivers of super-heated gas, rock, and ash—called pyroclastic flows—tearing down its slopes at over a hundred miles an hour. Material heated to 900 degrees Fahrenheit filled farm valleys, leaving ten people dead and another nine missing, believed buried under volcanic debris.

The eruptions at the beginning of August laid waste to the capital, Plymouth, a once-bustling town of five thousand people where reconstruction had only recently been completed after Hurricane Hugo destroyed or damaged much of the island's infrastructure in 1989. Pyroclastic flows deposited rocks the size of small trucks on the outskirts of the town and buried the center under feet of ash. "I doubt Plymouth will be inhabitable for generations," said then-police commissioner Francis Hooper.

"The luck of the Irish," quips Evette Bramble, referring to Montserrat's original colonists. Following Protestant-Catholic tension on the neighboring island of St. Kitts in the early seventeenth century, gov-

Soufrière volcano, left, as it emitted a mighty plume of smoke and ash last August, dwarfing the valley's palm trees; a Salem resident, above, dons an improvised mask against the particle-filled air

ernor Sir Frank Warren sent the Irish population to colonize Montserrat for the British. They were joined by others exiled by Cromwell's Catholic purges, and soon after, the first African slaves arrived in 1650 to work on the island's cotton, tobacco, and sugarcane plantations. A curious mix of Afro-Irish culture resulted. St. Patrick's Day was chosen by slaves as the date for their rebellion in 1768, and March 17 is still a public holiday on the island. The shamrock is featured on Montserrat's immigration stamp, the phone book is full of Galloways, Cadogans, and O'Briens, and the heel n' toe—an Irish jig—is still danced incongruously to calypso and *soca* rhythms.

Music has played a prominent role in Montserrat's late twentieth-century history too. The previously untouched island loosened up its real estate laws during the 1960s, selling off land and property to wealthy outsiders. Exclusive retirement homes, winter escapes, and guest houses sprang up. When Sir George Martin, the former Beatles manager, opened his Air Studios in 1979, he cemented Montserrat's image as a playground for the rich and famous. Paul McCartney, John Lennon, Mick Jagger, Police, Dire Straits, Elton John, and Simply Red all recorded there and vacationed at Martin's Montserrat hide-

away. Midge Ure, the former Ultravox singer and Band Aid co-organizer, bought a cottage on the island—property that the volcano has recently claimed.

To benefit volcano victims, Sir George promoted a concert at London's Royal Albert Hall on September 15. Many of the artists who had recorded on Montserrat took part, and over US\$1.5 million was raised. "I hope the aid from the concert will be more efficiently channeled than any government help so far," commented Donald Romeo, a Montserratian who has taken the plight of his fellow islanders to heart.

Locals have watched the gradual destruction of their island with stoic reserve. Montserratians are renowned as quietly proud, polite, and fatalistic people, and they are no strangers to the wrath of nature. In 1935 an earthquake wreaked havoc on the island, and the great flood of 1981 swept scores of animals, six cars, four people, and a couple of houses into the sea. Most notably, Hurricane Hugo destroyed or damaged 95 percent of Montserrat's infrastructure. After each event, visitors were quoted as being struck by the fortitude, equanimity, and courage of islanders in the face of disaster. And for two years, Montserratians were unswerving in their "don't worry, be happy" attitude to living in the shadow of a malevolent giant. Amid swirling dust clouds, and with hot pumice pebbles crunching underfoot, islanders have gone about their daily lives sporting T-shirts that underline their determination not to be shaken by the volcano's destructive potential. Bestselling slogans include "Ash falls, mud flows. What next? Who knows," "Now she puffs, will she blow? Pray to God and hope it's no," and "Don't worry, it's just another pyroclastic flow."

But after the eruptions that destroyed Plymouth at the beginning of August, Soufrière went into a six-week repose. While the volcano was quiet, a political scandal erupted. Britain had pledged over US\$60 million in aid over the past two years, but Montserratians were seeing precious little relief. Islanders decided they had had enough.

The Romans believed that volcanoes were gateways to hell, and for many of the island's evacuees this credo holds some figurative truth. In August 1995 several hundred people were moved from the slopes around the volcano and housed in the Gerald's Park emergency shelter, in the northern safe zone. The accommodation was intended for very short-term use—a week at the most—but two years on they are still there, living in conditions that ignore guidelines laid down by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and Britain's Overseas Development Agency (now Department for International Development). They live—in a tropical climate—in plastic, windowless hangar tents in which families of four and more are allocated an area eight by eight feet with no storage space. They have had to use their own sheets to erect partitions, and they store their food and cooking equipment under their beds. Toilet facilities are appalling. In some shelters there is only one toilet for every fifty people, and at Gerald's Park latrines designed for overnight use only are still in use today.

With the evacuations that have taken place since the original eruption, it has become increasingly necessary to house people in hurricane shelters such as churches and schools, where conditions were no better. Many living in churches have to clear out on Sundays so that services can be con-

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ducted. Thanks in part at least to the El Niño weather system, which has reduced hurricane risk in the Caribbean, Montserratians have had no call to use their packed hurricane shelters this season.

Some islanders never left the danger area around the volcano for fear of conditions awaiting them, and after inconsistent advice from politicians and scientists. The residents of Cork Hill were still there on June 25 when a pyroclastic flow passed within yards of a school full of children. Even after the event the government took two days to move residents. Chief scientist

at the time, Willy Aspinall, had hinted at a public meeting nine months earlier that the authorities had no place to house evacuees from the village, and some suggest that school exams on June 26 prevented the government from acting more promptly.

As stories of suffering, confusion, and neglect began to emerge, Montserratians wanted to know who was responsible. The ensuing transatlantic mudslinging cost the island's chief minister, Bertrand Osborne, his job, and Britain's international development minister, Clare Short, had to be hastily withdrawn from the fray.

While political fallout from the crisis was settling, Soufrière was showing increasing signs that any respite was going to be temporary. The magma dome inside the crater was growing at an alarming rate, and huge pressure was building up inside the volcano. As scientists at the Montserrat Volcano Observatory (MVO) issued increasingly dire warnings of the mountain's potential, including the slim chance of a single, massive eruption, worried eyes turned to the nearby island of Martinique. In 1902, in the worst volcanic disaster this century, the smoldering Mount Pelee blew

Scientists calculate that sooner or later all eleven volcanic islands will face problems similar to Montserrat's

its top in a single eruption, wiping out the then-capital of St. Pierre. Of its twenty-eight thousand citizens, only two survived.

When the Montserrat government once again seemed unprepared to react, residents of Salem, which had become the heart of the island and now was deemed under threat, took to the streets. They had just been told that their town had been split in two along the main road, with half being in the danger zone, the other half not. People were stupefied by the move, and for the first time in Montserrat's living memory, riot police were called out to dismantle barricades and break up the protests. "This is the last straw," said one. "If the volcano erupts, I just have to cross the street and I will be safe? What are we supposed to do?"

After two years of relative inertia and misdirected crisis management, officials on both sides of the Atlantic finally took the bit between their teeth. Two fast-track housing projects—one funded by Britain, the other by CARICOM (Caribbean Community and Common Market)—are now well under way, and the British government has committed itself to the development of a new capital town in the northern safe zone.

There are still rumblings of dissatisfaction over the handling of the crisis, and many demand to know exactly where the \$60 million was spent. But for the time being, the volcano has resumed center stage. The lull in activity ended on September 22 with one of Soufrière's biggest eruptions yet. Since then it has been erupting two or three times a day, coating not only Montserrat but also islands up to thirty miles away with ash.

Those Montserrattians who remain do not want to leave their island. But the volcano has turned over half of this formerly verdant jewel into a barren gray wasteland. Gone is access to the capital and Salem, the airport, most of the island's leisure and business facilities, and virtually all farmland. All the remaining population is packed into the barren and relatively safe northern third of the island, though this area is prone to ash and pumice showers. While efforts are now going ahead to ease the chronic shortage of decent accommodations, many islanders are sleeping on strangers' floors or in their cars. Some even return to the danger area at night as their only option, and all await exactly what new surprises Soufrière has in store for them.

This most recent series of eruptions reduces the fear, at least for now, of a single devastating blow. But according to one of the MVO's chief scientists, Professor Steve Sparks, the volcano could well continue its cycle of pressure building and explosive eruptions for a few more years at least. And Soufrière's activity, he says, has important implications for the rest of the Caribbean region.

Montserrat is one of eleven islands with potentially active volcanoes that sit along the collision zone of two tectonic plates. The earth's crust is divided into a series of these plates, which slide slowly around on top of hot ductile rock beneath. Along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, new plate material is constantly being created by the underwater eruption of lava, pushing one plate toward Europe and another toward the Americas at a rate of a couple of inches a year. In the Caribbean, the Atlantic Ocean

floor is essentially being forced under the American continent, creating tremendous friction and earthquakes, and throwing up volcanoes as “pressure-release valves.”

Sparks and his colleagues are certain that sooner or later all eleven islands with active volcanoes will face problems similar to Montserrat’s. They estimate that in the next century up to half of these islands are likely to have major eruptions capable of causing humanitarian crises. On some islands, like Dominica and St. Lucia, recent geological records indicate that eruptions could be very much larger and more destructive than those seen on Montserrat. Experts also point to the potential danger of tsunami (a phenomenon similar to a tidal wave) triggered by erupting submarine volcanoes. The curiously named Kick ‘Em Jenny, off the north coast of Grenada, which has erupted at least eight times since 1939, gives the most cause for concern.

The Seismic Research Unit of the University of the West Indies (SRU) is responsible for monitoring the region’s volcanoes and advising on the potential hazards posed, but Montserrat on its own has severely stretched the SRU’s capacity to respond. “The SRU is almost certainly under-resourced to carry out its regional mandate,” says Sparks.

Even when comprehensive scientific data are available, a lack of expertise among civil authorities and crossed lines of communication have led to the misinterpretation and ignoring of hazard evaluation. This breakdown in understanding between politicians and scientists has deepened the crisis on Montserrat since reports first began to circulate of Soufrière’s awakening ten years ago. A report authored by a group of scientists headed by Professor Geoff Wadge, and commissioned by the United Nations Disaster Relief Organization (UNDR0), stated that the Soufrière volcano would erupt again, and though the report gave no specific time frame, it detailed a number of scenarios, all of which put the capital of Plymouth at risk. The report recommended that forward planning should be considered to mitigate the loss of central utilities in Plymouth. But the scientists’ findings did not prevent the British and Montserrat governments from spending huge sums rebuilding the town on the same spot after it was decimated by Hurricane Hugo—two years after the scientists warned against the wisdom of such a move. The reconstruction of Plymouth took six years and was at the point of completion when

Soufrière took its toll on the town. A new, state-of-the-art hospital was destroyed before it had treated a single patient. The new library had never lent a book.

Since Montserrat’s volcano came back to life two years ago, a whole series of events suggests an inadequate political response to scientific advice and lack of planning for a long-term volcanic siege. In London, the House of Commons conducted an inquiry into the handling of the crisis, and in a report published last November criticized the British government, which had already faced stern rebuke for its role in the affair. In his evidence, Montserrat’s chief minister, David Brandt, accused Britain of being directly responsible for the nineteen deaths at Cork Hill in June, failing to pro-

A storefront on the road from Salem to St. John’s, on the island’s north end, succinctly catches residents’ humor and stoicism

vide sufficient sheltered housing for those in the danger area.

“If residents of the Caribbean are to live comfortably and confidently in the shadow of their rumbling giants, there are many lessons to be learned,” concludes Sparks. “No one is suggesting that the region is in danger of being devastated by volcanic activity, but more eruptions can be expected. These may not be imminent, but carefully planned, well-funded measures should be taken now to ensure that any future eruptions result in a Caribbean drama rather than a crisis.” ■