

## St Vincent's 1979 volcanic eruptions revisited

Philip Nanton

There are many ways to witness a volcanic eruption on a Caribbean island. For the outside world, disaster-hunting TV journalists provide images of billowing mushroom clouds, the wide-eyed panic of fleeing villagers, vox pop interviews with locals speaking a heavy English dialect, lush green vegetation turned ash-grey, and the inevitable politician offering his soundbite. He (usually it's a 'he') bemoans the heavy cost to his island infrastructure and celebrates the bravery and perseverance of his islanders, and the kindness of the people of the wider Caribbean. Stay a little longer and you gather other perspectives.

Or go back to when, on April 13, 1979, La Soufrière, the volcano in the north of St Vincent, erupted for the second time in the twentieth century and continued to erupt intermittently for the following twelve days. *The Volcano Suite*, a series of five poems published by the jazz musician and poet from St Vincent, Shake Keane, dramatises this period.

A few days in, I landed on the island to do PhD research on St Vincent's system of government. I arrived – a native returning after many years abroad – on a relatively empty plane with a few scientists for whom the eruptions were probably a once-in-a-lifetime event. Wealthier Vincentians were clamouring for plane seats to get off the island. The volcanic activity, and the evacuation of the northern half of the island that followed, put my fledgling research plans out of joint, but I began instead to take an interest in what was happening around me.

Eruptions first began around 4am on the morning of the 13th: Good Friday. The evacuation of residents from around the volcano started at 7.30. An army of mostly volunteer truck, van, bus and car drivers helped to relocate some 20,000 people to the southern half of the island. The speed of the evacuation probably saved many lives. The smoothness with which it was conducted was helped by the

experience of an earlier evacuation in 1971. This was a similar scenario except that the eruptive activity was temporary and far less powerful, and the disruption to lives short-lived.

The speed and longer duration of the 1979 evacuation caused some problems at evacuation camps. The ad hoc manner of fleeing led to a few camps being overcrowded and some camps under-used. Often volunteer drivers would drop evacuees off at the nearest camp in the identified 'safe zone' then turn around to make two or three more trips back to the danger zone to help others. Evacuees usually remained where they were first dropped off. Most camps housed around 200 to 250 evacuees, but three sheltered over 600 each. One, in the west coast town of Barrouallie, housed around 1,400 people.

For the evacuees, leaving their homes and smallholdings was as much of a disaster as the danger and fear of the volcano exploding over their heads. Eruption isn't only one thing: it's projectile molten rock, *nuée ardente* or pyroclastic flows – these are deadly, fast-moving currents of hot gases and lava fragments which suffocate anyone in their path – and heavy ash-fall that leaves a film of sandpaper-like dust on surfaces inside a house while its weight can ruin or collapse a roof. The people fleeing these dangers were, for the most part, small independent farmers or mountain villagers who worked on private estates. They were sheltered at public expense in converted schools, community halls, church buildings and unoccupied houses. Though spirited to relative safety, their absence left their homes in danger of looting, while untethered animals could trample and destroy food crops, and animals they owned could be stolen. All of which happened to some extent. So, in the lulls between eruptions, some farmers took the risk of returning to the danger zone to feed their animals, start replanting their crops and secure their property.

For nine weeks, some 15,000 people were offered temporary shelter in 61 evacuation camps. Another 5,000 people were lucky enough to find refuge in the homes of friends or relatives. In the makeshift camps, the only way to ensure privacy was with home-made barriers – a few cardboard boxes or a sheet strung up to demarcate a boundary. Each living area was sparsely furnished – a few camp cots or merely a donated mattress with its gaudy patterns on the ground, and

some simple cooking appliances. In these circumstances, in which residents of neighbouring villages were billeted in the same camp regardless of local politics, ongoing inter-village feuds were easily revived. One night, in a school-turned-evacuation camp in the capital, Kingstown, a communal cutlass-wielding fight broke out. A Rose Hall villager took a fancy to a woman from a neighbouring village, Chateaubelair. He might have been eying her for a while. He could have been drunk. Who knows? The fracas upended the schoolrooms in which they were billeted. Police were called to restore order after communal cuts and blows.

Relief supplies from Western countries – United Kingdom, Canada, the USA – began arriving quickly. Food supplies were stored at police headquarters in Kingstown and distributed regularly by volunteers to evacuation camps around the island. The supply depot inside the headquarters was a scene of vans being loaded, bureaucrats with clipboards checking off supplies for different vans, drivers shouting to other drivers to get out of the way so that they could start their journey. Guards, like me, were positioned in the open-backed vans among the tinned food in boxes, sacks of donated rice and bags of vegetables. As supplies did not always arrive at their destination, our job was simply to ensure that they reached the designated evacuation camp, and were not conveniently dropped off elsewhere en route.

Food sent from abroad was often the source of some tension between evacuees on one hand and camp managers and volunteers on the other. As I've mentioned, evacuees were mainly rural, agricultural folk. Camp administrators, often from the more urbanised south of the island, were mainly school headteachers, civil servants and volunteers with substantially different class backgrounds from the evacuees. With contrasting lifestyles and backgrounds, unsurprisingly, conflict soon developed between evacuees on one hand and camp managers and volunteers on the other. Disputes were over camp management and the attitudes of the evacuees, especially over the food aid.

Evacuees were inevitably excluded from camp management and so had few options as to how to spend their day. They could leave the camp for as long as possible, complain at their treatment, or remain quiet. Meals were often a bone of contention. Like all locals, they were accustomed to fibrous, locally grown,

'ground provisions' or root crops – sweet potatoes, tania, dasheen – not the softer, processed tinned food that was donated. Many evacuees found this food inedible. To the volunteers and camp managers, this 'attitude' reflected a lack of gratitude towards the public-spirited kindness that was being provided locally and internationally.

Some of the clothing that was received as aid from abroad was more appropriate to temperate climates. In temperatures of around 31 degrees centigrade in Kingstown, it was not unusual to see young men swaggering through the capital's main street in oversized winter coats, woollen jumpers and heavy boots. These clothes were so distinctive they were soon given a local name: 'Bodow clothes'. They were sometimes distributed from the governing political party bases in the capital. So, the term succinctly linked political party generosity, foreign donations and the sound of the erupting volcano.

After nine weeks, and with no further sign of major eruptions, the government decided that schools needed to be cleaned and reopened. Evacuees were offered resettlement packs with which to return home or plastic tents in which to shelter. In heavy rainfall, many of these tents soon collapsed and were found too hot for daytime use. Nevertheless, the trickle of evacuees starting to return home before the nine weeks were up quickly grew into a flood.

The cost of feeding 20,000 evacuees was officially estimated at \$2.1m (US) and cash donations from abroad totalled \$800,000 (US). No account of the use of these funds was ever published. The island's premier at the time, Milton Cato, took personal charge of the relief effort and used the national radio station to make frequent broadcasts on the activity of the volcano and the relief donations that were arriving. After the evacuees returned to what remained of their homes, he held a general election later that year and was returned to power. His public management of the disaster was widely praised locally and probably contributed to this electoral success. In the same year (1979), the island applied for and obtained political independence from Britain.

Now, in the wake of the April 2021 eruptions, disaster-hunting journalists have once again come and gone. Evacuation camps have once again been established and homes opened to friends and family. Appeals for funds and

material support both regionally and internationally are underway. Of course, times have changed, not least due to the parallel ravages of the Covid pandemic and the ever-present possibility of an outbreak of the virus in evacuation camps and homes.

As I remarked earlier, Shake Keane wrote his *Volcano Suite Poems* back in 1979, the same year as those eruptions that I have been discussing. Now, in 2021, the volcano is erupting again. Introducing his poems back then, he observed that the same geological process that created beauty and fertility on an island can also, in the blink of an eye, lay waste to one-third or more of it.

And yet his poems suggest that something positive can come out of the experience of eruption - not merely the will to survive but, as he put it, 'the practical necessity of love for one another'. So, at this time, I think it is fitting to revisit his *Volcano Suite Poems* and pay homage to a history that seems to be repeating itself. Here is my reading from these poems accompanied by the music of Gene Lawrence from St Lucia.

### **Soufrière (79) (1)**

The thing split Good Friday in two  
and that good new morning groaned  
and snapped  
like breaking an old habit

Within minutes  
people  
who had always been leaving nowhere  
began arriving nowhere  
entire lives stuffed in pillow-cases  
and used plastic bags  
naked children suddenly transformed  
into citizens

'Ologists with their guilty little instruments

were already oozing about the mountainsides  
bravely  
and by radio

(As a prelude to resurrection and brotherly love  
you can't beat ructions and eruptions)

Flies ran away from the scene of the crime  
and crouched like Pilate  
in the secret places of my house  
washing their hands

Thirty grains of sulphur  
panicked off the phone  
when it rang

Mysterious people ordered  
other mysterious people  
to go to mysterious places  
"immediately"

I wondered about the old woman  
who had walked back to hell  
to wash her Sunday clothes

All the grey-long day  
music  
credible and incredibly beautiful  
came over the radio  
while the mountain refreshed itself

Someone who lives

inside a microphone  
kept things in order

Three children  
in unspectacular rags  
a single bowl of grey dust between them  
tried to manure the future  
round a young plum tree

The island put a white mask  
over its face  
coughed cool as history  
and fell in love with itself

A bus travelling heavy  
cramped as Calvary  
thrust its panic into the side of a hovel  
and then the evening's blanket  
sent like some strange gift from abroad  
was rent by lightning

After a dream  
of rancid hope and Guyana rice  
I awoke to hear  
that the nation had given itself  
two hundred thousand dollars

The leaves did not glisten when wet

An old friend  
phoned from Ireland  
to ask about the future

my Empire cigarettes  
have lately been tasting of sulphur  
I told her that.

— April 22, 1979

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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Extract from *The Volcano Suite*, 1979 © Shake Keane