

LA SOUFRIERE



The Eruption of the Soufrière Mountains in the Island of St Vincent, 30 April 1812
Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851)
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La Soufrière means 'The Sulfurer' and is situated on the island of St Vincent in the Windward Islands. It is an active volcano and very occasionally it erupts in spectacular fashion. It did so in 1812 and Captain William Dowers RN, commanding HMS Ringdove, witnessed the whole thing. His account appears in 'The Naval Chronicle for 1813', which can be accessed at https://archive.org/details/navalchroniclefounse_1

Thursday, April 30th, 1812, at single anchor in Kingston Bay, St Vincent's.

A.M. Light airs, and hazy weather; observed thick columns of smoke, ascending to a great height from the Soufriere at the northern extremity of the island.

At noon, very sultry. At 8 P.M. a moderate breeze from the eastward, with hard rain, which continued till near midnight.

Friday, May 1st 1812. At 30. after midnight, the rain having ceased, weighed, and made sail to the W.N.W.; heard a confused and loud noise, which at first was thought to be the surf on the beach; it soon increased, and resembled the noise made by the wheels of a heavy loaded waggon, passing rapidly over a paved bridge.

At 1.15. A.M. abreast of Bucarnent Bay, the noise resembled a dreadful squall of wind, approaching with terrible violence from a distance.

Shortened sail, and prepared for it. At 1.20. heard something falling on the water, like large drops of rain: in a few moments afterwards a thick cloud suddenly descended – it fell calm – and stones, from the size of a sparrow's egg to grape-shot, fell on the deck.

At 2.30.A.M. the roaring of the volcano became dreadfully loud, and terrific, a dark black cloud descended from the eastward, total darkness enveloped us, and vitrified ashes, and sand, fell very thick; the sea became agitated and confused.

At 3.A.M. the roaring of the volcano scarcely perceptible; the atmosphere over the N.W. point of the island appears as if illuminated by an immense blaze of fire; vivid zig-zag lightning, perfectly blue, dancing about, in all the various forms of beautiful fire-works, and by its constant light, enables us to

see an immense column of smoke, ascending to the height of 5 or 6 miles perpendicular; it then appears to explode, and rolls off in grand and majestic, thick, plummy clouds.

The forked lightning occasionally appears to dart through this immense tube of smoke or vapour, and intermingling with its electric matter, seems to set the heavens in a blaze of fire. At this time we were 5 or 6 miles from Layou, and near 30 from the Souffriere.

At 4 A.M. the electric fire, and forked lightning, over, and near the Souffriere, more vivid than before, the sky in every other direction very black and dark, loud peals of thunder are heard.

The vitrified sand still falling on our decks, and, to add to the horrors of the morning, daylight does not appear; and, at 9 o'clock A.M. we are obliged to breakfast by candlelight.

Soon after, the sky cleared in the S.W. and appeared settled and fine.

At 9.30.A.M. daylight appeared, and the sun broke through the sulphurous clouds overhead, like a blue ball of fire.

Immense columns of thick sulphurous smoke are still ascending to an amazing height from the Souffriere. Employed all day in endeavouring to get up the Beguia channel, but the wind keeps flying about in light airs all round the compass; the ropes are so enlarged with the sand which has fallen, and the blocks choked, that the brig is nearly unmanageable.

At noon, calm, observed the sulphurous vapour, like a thick haze, or fog, making its way along shore, from the volcano, towards the town of Barowallio.

The compasses are attracted more than three points to the westward of the true north.

Layou bears east 5 or 6 miles. The surface of the sea is covered with floating masses of volcanic ashes, appearing like patches of the gulf weeds, or fish spawn.

Sent a boat on shore to communicate, found the inhabitants had abandoned the leeward country and gone to Kingstown.

At 5.30. P.M. we were enveloped by the sulphurous vapour, or fog, which was so dense and oppressive as to affect the lungs and cause a difficulty of respiration.

A fine powder, resembling a mixture of antimony and sulphur, continues falling from the clouds and insinuates itself into the eyes, ears and every part of the clothes (making every person on board look like millers), it fills the lay of the ropes and chokes all the blocks.

At midnight, dreadful gloomy looking weather, still surrounded with the sulphurous vapour, the people begin to cough violently, find a great difficulty of respiration, and seem apprehensive of suffocation.

Saturday, May 2nd, 1812

A very confused and agitated sea. The calm and sulphurous fog continued till 9 A.M.

The sulphuric powder has turned the paint work black and glossy, and every kind of metal substance has changed colour.

Employed shovelling up, and throwing overboard, the sulphuric powder which, during the last two hours, has covered every part of the ship some inches.

Began to scrub and wash the rigging, from the mast head to the deck.

At 10 a breeze from the eastward, the atmosphere strongly impregnated with sulphur, and smelling like bilge water.

Vast quantities of large trees and broken wood floating about, just torn by some violent effort of nature from the earth.

Bore down to speak to a sloop, which proved to be from St. Eustatia to Grenada; he told us that on Thursday night, to leeward of Dominica, he heard, from midnight, till past two o'clock, what he thought was a tremendous firing of cannon; that the sulphuric powder and ashes had been falling on board him since 2 P.M. of yesterday, when he was off St. Lucia.

At noon, a strong breeze from the eastward; lat. 13° 30' N.

The atmosphere very dense and hazy; St. Vincent's completely hid in the sulphurous vapour.

Volcanic ashes are floating in long streams from east to west, looking exactly like the patches of gulf weed generally seen in crossing the Atlantic.

Made all sail for Martinique. The attraction of the compasses has ceased.

Ringdove, off St Vincent's, May 7th 1812.

Extract of a Letter to his Excellency Sir William Young, Bart. Governor of Tobago, from Captain Dowers

"Enclosed I send you an account of the explosion of the Souffriere of this island, which you thought was a naval action! Barbadoes, Antigua, Guadaloupe, Mariagalante, Dominica and Martinique thought the same and were under arms all night.

At the moment of writing this, we are off the north point of the island, which represents the most melancholy and desolate appearance you can imagine. Not a spot of verdure to be found anywhere, the surface covered with a white sulphuric powder, the trees perfectly bare of leaves, with their branches drooping, as if vegetation was at an end. The black house, and the chariab's huts all knocked down by stones from the volcano. A thick haze envelops the leeward part of the island, and extends a great distance to sea. A powder, resembling a mixture of antimony and sulphur, falls constantly from this haze and turns all kinds of metal surfaces black, like bilge water. We saw the mountain emit (last night at half past 7 o'clock) a thick column of smoke, it ascended 3 or 4 miles above the summit, charged with electric fire, which played about in very pretty fireworks, and in the course of ten minutes dispersed, the smoke blowing to the eastward against the trade wind."