

PROLOGUE

Almost 3,000 people, possibly more, were killed in January 1951 by a catastrophic volcanic eruption at Mount Lamington in what is now modern-day Papua New Guinea (Figure 0.1). This tragic event could be regarded as the deadliest natural disaster in Australian history because the Australian Government was the colonial power at the time and had responsibility for the safety of its subjects under trusteeship arrangements (Downs 1980). The Australian administrator of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea in 1951, Colonel J.K. Murray, referred to a ‘scene of disaster unparalleled in Australian history’ (Murray 1968, 21). Such statements do, however, require some clarification and modification.

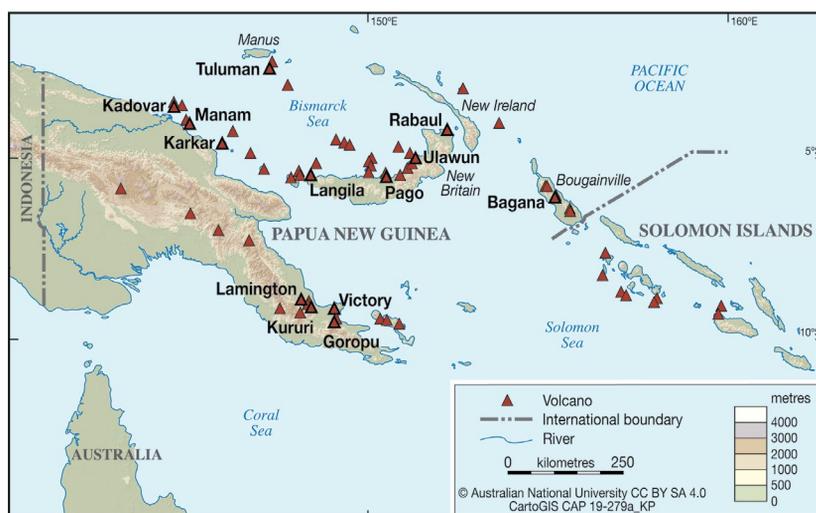


Figure 0.1. Volcano distribution in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands

The triangles in this map represent volcanoes that are known, or believed, to have been in eruption during the Holocene epoch starting at 10,000 years BC. The map has been adapted from those published by Simkin and Siebert (1994, 58) and Siebert, Simkin and Kimberley (2010, 75; see also Johnson 2013, xxiii–iv for further details). Named volcanoes are those referred to in the main text.

First, most of those who perished in the volcanic eruption were local Sangara people, one of a larger group of preliterate Papuans whom the colonists called the ‘Orokaiva’. This means, arguably, that the catastrophe at Lamington was not truly an ‘Australian’ one, and given also that only 35 white people—expatriates from Australia—were killed by the eruption. Second, the volcanic eruption at Mount Lamington was a sudden-impact, geophysical type of natural hazard—a group of phenomena that also includes earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, tropical cyclones, severe storms, coastal surges and flooding. These are in contrast to the slower-onset and longer-lasting natural hazards of widespread, deadly diseases and related pandemics. At least 15,000 Australians are thought to have died from the ‘Spanish’ influenza pandemic in 1919 after it was introduced to Australia by soldiers returning from service during World War I in Europe (see, for example, the centennial article by Curson and McCracken 2019).

The term ‘natural disaster’ is still used widely today, but it too requires some clarification. The expression carries the implication that the cause of the disaster, or blame for it, is solely the impact of a natural hazard or, in insurance terms, an ‘Act of God’. However, people affected (if not killed) by disasters may live in highly hazard-vulnerable environments by their own choice and, perhaps, even know and accept that there was some risk of future destructive natural impacts. Orokaiva communities, for example, flourished by developing gardens on the rich volcanic soils of Mount Lamington. How this advantage was balanced against the natural hazard risks identified through their experience and traditional stories about the nearby mountain is an example of community risk-management that is addressed today by many ‘at-risk’ societies elsewhere in the world and at different times of history.

The Lamington eruption of 1951 is well known in volcano science because of the outstanding landmark report published in 1958 by G.A.M. ‘Tony’ Taylor, a volcanologist employed by BMR, the Australian Government’s Bureau of Mineral Resources, Geology and Geophysics (Taylor 1958). BMR Bulletin 38 is an insightful, well-written and informative account that is still referred to in many, more modern, volcanological research papers, and in textbooks dealing with the so-called ‘*peléean*’ and ‘*vulcanian*’ types of volcanic eruption seen at Lamington in 1951. Taylor’s scientific account is, in contrast, quite stark in dealing with the disaster management aspects of the eruption that, at the time, were both controversial and well publicised. This omission may have been deliberate to concentrate on the volcanology rather than on the conflicts and disputes of the public controversy.

‘Relief’ and ‘recovery’ are two of the four traditional sectors of the disaster management spectrum. The two other parts, which are just as (or even more) important, are ‘prevention’ and ‘preparedness’—that is, what can be done by communities and authorities to reduce disaster-risk before a natural hazard actually strikes, and what can be done before the effects of the disaster escalate to facilitate rapid and effective evacuation of lives and immediate protection of property. All four of these sectors provide the context for this study. Emphasis is given to the prevention and preparedness aspects of the disaster because the primary purpose of this book is to determine why so many Orokaiva were killed in 1951.

A large part of this study is an examination of the abundant colonial literature extending from 1874 to 1950 and, in particular, the shorter, pre-disaster period from 1906 to 1951 when Australia was the governing colonial power (1951, by coincidence, was the jubilee year of the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia). This concentration on colonial records is not purposefully made to identify colonialism as the sole cause of the disaster and so to assign blame for it, but rather to determine how, and how many, disaster-vulnerability factors came to be created at Mount Lamington before the 1951 eruption. Inevitably, the book is about making historical judgements while recognising that perceptions of the past can shift, depending on the historical distance between an event and one’s own contemporary standpoint.

This book, then, represents a synthesis of selected information from many different sources on the disaster management story of the Mount Lamington eruption of 1951, including peer-reviewed publications, folios in government archives, periodicals, newspapers and magazines, as well as diaries, memoirs and the records of correspondence and of interviews with eyewitnesses and their descendants. A major challenge, therefore, and in common with other attempts at writing compressed histories, has been not so much what to include but rather what to leave out. Much informal or ‘grey-literature’ information is of high quality, but different opinions and judgements had to be compared and assessed, not without some subjectivism where conflicts of fact or interpretation arose. Such are the challenges of memory and historical accuracy. Of archival necessity, this history is also one seen almost entirely through an Australian lens. It includes a few records of the experiences of individual Orokaiva, which are given some emphasis where appropriate, but many of these records were produced by European people anyway as a result of listening to their Papuan informants. Some of the information in this book was used summarily in a single chapter on the Lamington eruption of 1951 in a previous book by the author (Johnson 2013).

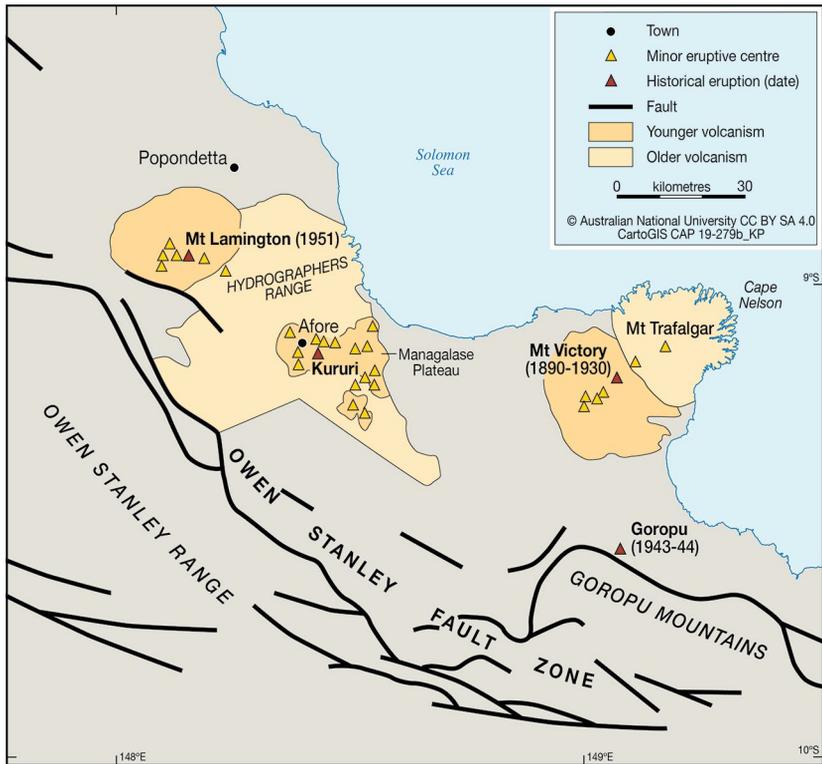


Figure 0.2. Volcanic features on north-eastern side of the Owen Stanley Range

Quaternary volcanic areas and minor eruptive centres are shown here for the north-eastern side of the Owen Stanley Range in eastern Papua. The map is adapted from those of Davies and Smith (1971, fig. 1) and de Saint Ours (1988, fig. 1). The distribution of minor eruptive centres, following de Saint Ours, is largely schematic but is more accurate for Mount Lamington and Mount Victory in Figures 9.2 and 9.5, respectively.

An unexpected consequence of conducting the research for this book has been the intrusion of other volcanoes in the Lamington story, most notably Mount Victory, an active volcano similar in geology to Mount Lamington and only 100 kilometres to the east-south-east of it (see Figures 0.1 and 0.2). Other historically ‘intrusive’ volcanoes include distant Rabaul in East New Britain and Goropu to the south of Mount Victory.

The final chapter of this book deals with the postcolonial period—that is, with events following Papua New Guinea’s independence on 16 September 1975. This epilogue-like chapter is included, necessarily, because of the attention that Mount Lamington volcano and the Orokaiva people received after 1975 by a range of people, including outside investigators representing different, mainly academic disciplines—from the social sciences to the earth sciences. It includes also those people—both Orokaiva and Australian—not wishing the disaster to be forgotten, notably the friends and family of those who suffered there. Memorialisation and remembrance are, therefore, key aspects of this disaster management story.

This text is taken from *Roars from the Mountain: Colonial Management of the 1951 Volcanic Disaster at Mount Lamington*, by R. Wally Johnson, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.