

Dr PHILIP CASS is reviews editor of Pacific Journalism Review.

# Story of Rabaul eruptions has lessons for wider Pacific

***Return to Volcano Town: Reassessing the 1937-43 volcanic eruptions at Rabaul***, by R. Wally Johnson and Neville Threlfall (editors). Canberra: ANU Press, 2023. 410 pages, ISBN 9781760466039.

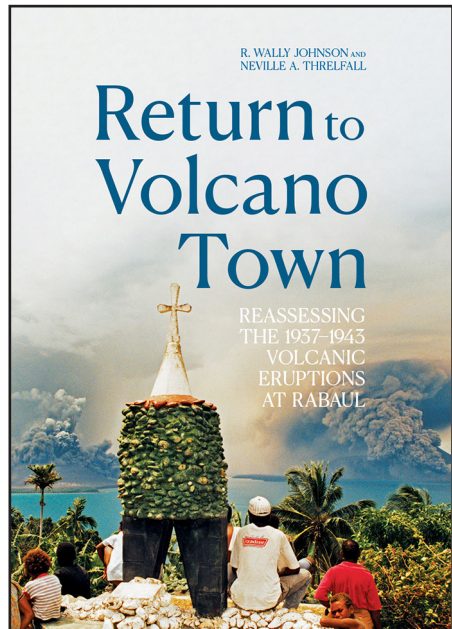
EARLY one morning in 1953 my father and kiap David Hook set out from Popondetta to climb Mount Lamington in what was then the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. Mount Lamington had exploded in January 1951, the largest eruption on January 21 releasing a pyroclastic flow that roared down the mountain and killed an estimated 3000 people.

The carriers working with my father and the patrol officer abandoned them as they approached the mountain and it was towards the end of the day that my father came home, his boots cut to ribbons by the volcanic rock, his clothes ragged and soaked in sweat and his pockets full of colour slide film.

My family would be enthralled by his pictures of boiling rock and pools of lava for years afterwards.

I had it much easier.

When ‘my’ volcanoes—Vulcan and Tavurvur—exploded in Rabaul in



September 1994 I was taking photographs of the Hiri Moale festival for the *Times of Papua New Guinea* as the trading rafts from along the Papuan coast came in to Ela Beach in Port Moresby.

Foreign journalists were being discouraged from going to Rabaul, but my boss, Anna Solomon, got me onto a flight with a group of business people going to inspect, among other things, the damage to the Travelodge hotel where I had stayed on a research trip at the beginning of the year.

By the time we landed two people had been killed; one, we were told, by a flying rock while walking across the golf course and the other run over during the evacuation. The official death toll later rose to 10.

There was no lava to be seen, just a sound like a jet engine that went on day and night and filled the air with

volcanic dust and grit that destroyed expensive cameras (mine cost me 20 kina from Steamships and was fine) and filled Simpson Harbour with pumice. As this new book reminds us, the ash plumes were so big they were photographed by astronauts on the space shuttle *Discovery*.

Everything was grey and the heat was stifling. The dining room of the Travelodge was full of water that had rushed in during the eruption. My photographs in the next issue of the *Times* showed roofs and buildings collapsed under the weight of the ash and of armed security guards who were there to stop the looting, but were themselves accused of making off with other people's property.

One photograph showed the local owners of the roofless Rabaul Club packing up their belongings. When Anna saw the photo in paste-up she said, '*Oh, wantok, mi sori tumas long yu.*'

Neville Threlfall's new book covers the 1994 eruption in far more scientific detail than I can supply and it is all the better for it. He and Johnson have adapted and updated the earlier work, *Volcano Town*, which gives a good general background to vulcanological activity in Papua New Guinea.

The new book brings the story up to date and uses the latest research to explain what has happened and how. Volcanoes are extraordinarily important to PNG. Eruptions in the past have scattered ash from the Bismarck sea to the highlands and Rabaul, once the capital of German New Guinea, is built around a massive caldera caused by the

collapse of a volcano. The fact that the town is surrounded by active volcanoes and volcanoes that might become active give it a certain nervous charm.

For vulcanologists, the 1994 eruptions allowed for a much closer re-examination of the 1937 explosion which killed about 500 people and devastated the town. It has also allowed speculation about a number of issues such as whether there are triggers for eruptions and what patterns can be established which show a link between an earthquake in one part of the world and a volcano in another up to 30 years later.

It is a matter of fierce debate in the vulcanological community, but in the Pacific, where so many volcanoes are active, it might be a vital one. Understanding how populations have reacted to eruptions, what level of damage might be caused and how to respond to it are vital issues for long term planning.

(One local entrepreneur suggested that a fortune could be made by dredging all the pumice out of the harbour and selling it for fertiliser)

There is good detail about how authorities have reacted and might react to such disasters, but it is worth remembering that the lessons from the Rabaul eruptions may also be applicable elsewhere.

The so-called 'ring of fire' that encircles the Pacific also comes into New Zealand's backyard. While not strictly volcanic (although involving the same titanic subterranean forces) leading scientists have recently warned that an earthquake is odds-on to occur in the

Hikurangi Subduction Zone where the Pacific tectonic plate slides under the Australian one.

An earthquake here could shake New Zealand for up to eight minutes, resulting in an estimated 20,000 deaths. Losses due to damaged buildings alone would be \$144 billion.

**Reference**

Meyer, F. (2024, May 24). Whatever the ‘big one’ is, New Zealand is not prepared. *Newsroom*. <https://newsroom.co.nz/2024/05/24/whatever-the-big-one-is-new-zealand-is-not-prepared/>

# 30 years and going strong!

Congratulations  
to the *Pacific Journalism Review*.

Greetings from *Media Asia*,  
your partner since 1994.

