

Tambora and Tasmania: the challenges of climate history

FROM AN ISLAND FAR, FAR AWAY

Don Garden

PLAN

CHALLENGES OF INTERPRETATION AND EVIDENCE

TAMBORA VOLCANO AND ITS WORLD-WIDE IMPACTS

VAN DIEMENS LAND AND TAMBORA

NEW SOUTH WALES AND TAMBORA

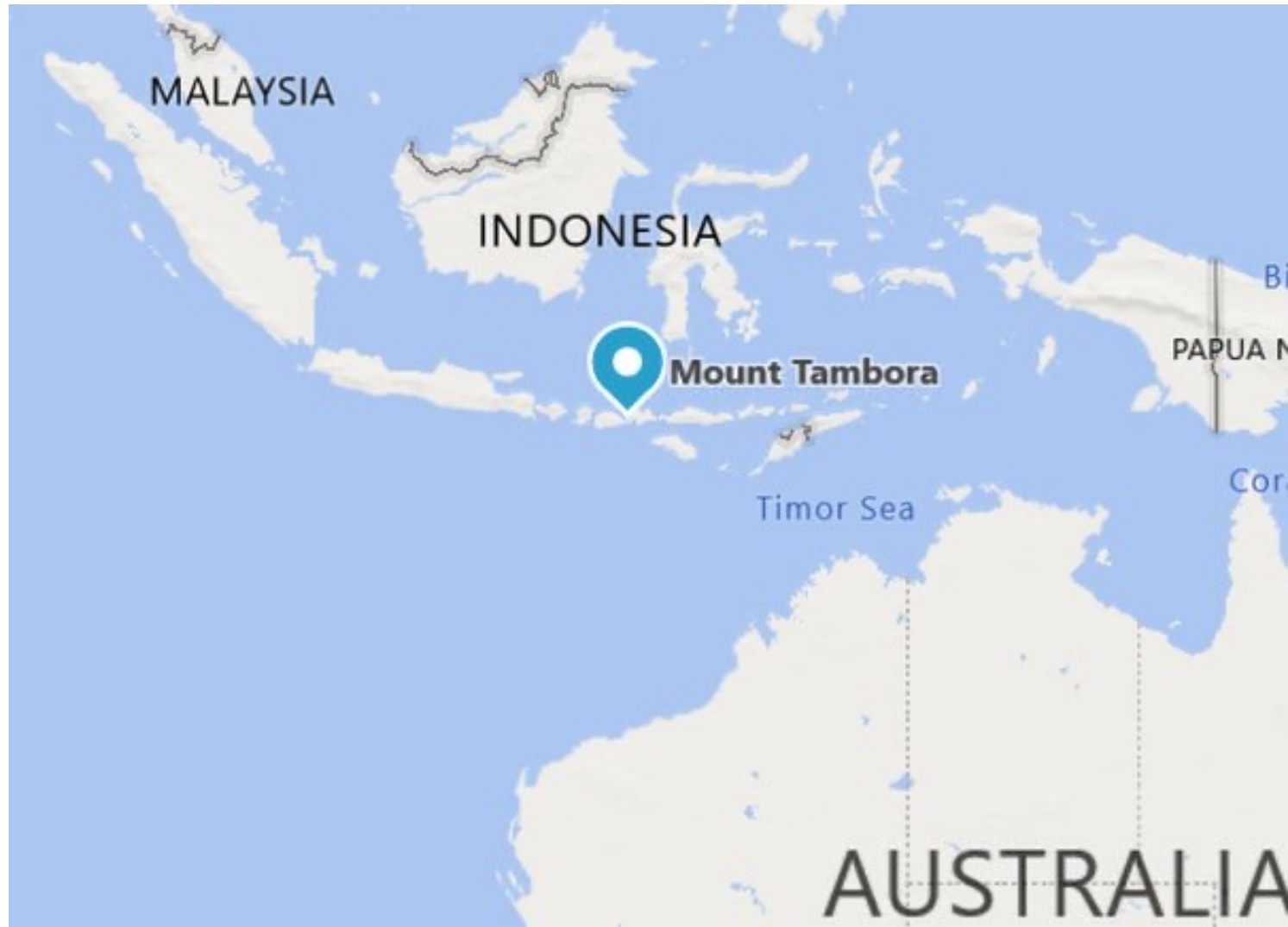
CONCLUSION

Hobart Town Gazette, 13 July 1816

The Winter has hitherto been **as cold and wet as the Colony has experienced for some years past [my emphasis]**; for this last Week an almost incessant Rain has rendered the Streets nearly impassable, the ground being completely rotten, and full of water like a sponge. From the rapid rise of the Mountain Stream, and great body of water that came down it within these last 24 hours, by the severest Rain imaginable, and which totally obscured the surrounding Mountains; serious apprehensions were entertained that a Flood similar to the one which happened in March 1809 would be the consequence; and from which much distress and loss was sustained by the Inhabitants on the Stream; but as the Water is now subsiding, it is to be hoped the Calamity will be averted...

3 questions we can ask of this.

1. Was the winter really as cold and wet as any previously experienced by the British colonists?
2. How accurate were such memories and recollections likely to be?
3. If the winter was so bad, can we explain why?





‘For three years following Tambora’s explosion, to be alive, almost anywhere in the world, meant to be hungry. In New England, 1816 was nick-named “the Year Without a Summer” or “Eighteen-Hundred-and-Froze-to-Death.” Germans called 1817 “the Year of the Beggar.” Across the globe harvests perished in frost and drought or were washed away by flooding rains. Villagers in Vermont survived on hedgehogs and boiled nettles, while peasants of Yunnan in China sucked on white clay’

Gillen D’Arcy Wood, *Tambora: the eruption that changed the world*, Princeton University Press, 2014, p.9

George W Evans, South-West View of Hobart Town, 1819
(detail of item in SLNSW collection)



Robert Knopwood



... by the constant Rains we have had for this last month, the ground is become almost a quagmire, preventing work of any kind to be done on it; & as from the present appearance of the Atmosphere, there is a great likelihood that a still further continuance of the Rain might be expected; it must be very late in the season before anything can be done with the land...

From the accounts that have been received from the Coal River Settlements, much damage we find may have been done to the late sown Wheat, by the very heavy Rains; great part of the Country has been under Water, destroying Gardens, and sweeping away Fruit Trees, Fences, &c.

... particular care is now required in pasturing Sheep, to prevent the mortality that an unusual season might produce...

There has only been one season since the settling of the Colony, that has been so inclement as for the last Week—with almost incessant Rains, there was a gust of wind from the S. West on Thursday night, attended with a very heavy fall of Snow, which covered all the surrounding Mountains on Friday morning, increasing the severity of the cold, and unpleasant weather; and what has added to the uncomfortableness of the Inhabitants, has been the difficulty of procuring Wood for firing, from the Roads being nearly impassable for Carts.

Hobart Town Gazette 20 July 1816

I felt surprised when I got into the cultivated fields to find March 21st and great part of the crop not reaped.; not ripe; and there was much grain that year that never ripened but was made into poor hay. I found afterwards that the Harvest in Britain was very wet and much grain spoiled. Ever since that year I have found that our seasons follow after the British wet or dry – very hot or very cool.

NEW SOUTH WALES 1816-17 UNDER FIVE HEADINGS

1. PUBLISHED SOURCES

2. HAWKESBURY RIVER FLOODS

3. AN INLAND SEA?

4. LAKE BATHURST AND LAKE GEORGE

5. WHEAT CROPS

Macquarie recorded in his journal on 31 May 1816:

‘It having rained incessantly and very heavily for these last four days including the present Day, there is reason to apprehend that we shall have a Flood, and that there will be a serious inundation of the Rivers Hawkesbury and Nepean and South Creek; the Wind now blowing from the South East, which is the one that has generally blown during former Floods in this Colony. — It is now 5, O’Clock in the afternoon and it is raining and blowing most furiously and it has been a Continued Gale of Wind from the South East for the last three days.’

‘At 2. P.M. this day I received an Express Dispatch from ... Windsor, reporting to me the distressing event of a Complete and awful Flood having taken place there on Friday the 31st. Ultimo, by the inundation of the River Hawkesbury and South Creek, both of which had overflowed their Banks and laid the whole of the Low Country under Water, to the great injury and distress of the Settlers residing on the Banks of that River and Creek, who will lose their Houses and greatest part of the Grain both in and out of the Ground.’

Macquarie Journal, 2 June 1816



<https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection-items/hawkesbury-flood-1816-taken-rofton-cottage-windsor-no4>

John Oxley



Lake George when full 1961



The very unusual tempestuous and rainy Weather that we have experienced at Van Diemen's Land this Winter appears to have extended along the shores of New South Wales, beyond the limits of the British Settlements.—By private Letters, and also by the Sydney Gazettes we unhappily learn that two dreadful Inundations at the Hawkesbury, one in May, and the other in July, have swept away, rotted, and destroyed the feed Wheat committed to the ground; & the miserable impoverished Settlers are now utterly undone... Much the greater part of the late Maize Crops are destroyed, having become absolutely rotten from the long continued rains... [cont]

continued

Happily for the Settlers of Van Diemen's Land although they have had uncommon severe winterly Weather, yet little damage has been sustained, or losses suffered by Individuals at the various Settlements throughout the land: And we have the satisfaction to look forward to a most abundant Harvest, which we trust through the blessing of Providence will not only enable us to afford consumption for almost any accession of population, but also supply the wants of the Settlements at Port Jackson.

Hobart Gazette, 31 Aug 1816