

“A blinding and incandescent ball of light”: The volcano and its eruption in Patrick Leigh Fermor’s *The Violins of Saint-Jacques*

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Abstract: Well-known for his non-fiction works on southeastern Europe, the British author, traveller, and decorated World War II veteran Patrick Leigh Fermor also wrote about the Caribbean. Indeed, this region was to provide the inspiration for his only novel, *The Violins of Saint-Jacques* (1953), which to date has received limited attention from scholars. As a deft portrayal of idyllic colonial life on a fictional French-ruled island ultimately destroyed by a catastrophic volcanic eruption, the work naturally brings to mind the devastating 1902 eruption of Mont Pelée on Martinique. Accordingly, this contribution analyses the role played by the fictional Salpetrière volcano in the book, drawing on its position as a fiery leitmotif which casts both a figurative and a literal shadow over the pages of this short work. In examining the symbolism of the stirring volcano both as a backdrop to the preparations for the frivolous main event (a Shrove Tuesday masque) as well as the agent of the island’s destruction amid lava and flames, it is intended to underline the crucial importance of environmental factors, thereby aiming to present new literary perspectives on how societies interact with the potentially destructive power of the natural world.

Keywords: *Patrick Leigh Fermor; natural disasters; volcanic eruptions; colonial Caribbean; twentieth-century English literature.*



University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series
<https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/>
Volume 15 | Issue 1 | 2025 |



<https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.15.1.1>
ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)
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Introduction

With a life spanning almost a century, the polymath British author Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915-2011) distinguished himself in several domains, including as a decorated war veteran and as a charismatic adventurer and traveller. As a writer, Leigh Fermor's fame was cemented by his famous trilogy of works – *A Time of Gifts* (1977), *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), and *The Broken Road* (2013) – which together charted the walk he had taken across Europe as a young man during the early 1930s. In providing a literary testament of his long solo trek all the way from Hook of Holland to Constantinople, his observations on his surroundings and the manifold characters he encountered offered a valuable portrait of a continent in flux (Louÿs 1-2). With the period between the World Wars marked by incipient fascism and the rise in ethnonationalist ideologies across many of the countries Leigh Fermor passed through, his works therefore represent a valuable chronicle of a vanished time and way of life.

During World War II, Leigh Fermor played an important role through his service as a British intelligence officer in the Balkans, and after the war he ended up settling in Greece with his wife Joan (Campbell n. pg.). He became a man of letters and completed several works, of which the abovementioned trilogy is a part. Though Leigh Fermor passed away a decade ago, his literary legacy still endures (Bakken 2-3) and his rural villa in the Peloponnese retains its longstanding status as a meeting place for creative and cultural activities (Flores-Vianna n. pg.).

In terms of his output, Leigh Fermor's oeuvre is composed of books, screenplays, translations, and journalism, most commonly with a southeastern European theme, but also occasionally about other geographical settings too. Indeed, one of Leigh Fermor's early works, *The Traveller's Tree: A Journey Through The Caribbean Islands* (1950), relates his journey by sea to many islands of the West Indies, which were then still largely under European colonial rule. It was a part of the world that he was unfamiliar with, and the Englishman was "alert to the strangeness of his new environment" (Gogineni 179). Leigh Fermor began his wide-ranging travels in the French colonies of Guadeloupe and Martinique, moving then to British-ruled Dominica, Barbados, and Trinidad, before continuing to several of the smaller islands under American (St Thomas), British (Antigua, Grenada, St Kitts, St Lucia, Grenada), Dutch (St Eustatius, Saba), and Franco-Dutch (St Martin) sovereignty. He subsequently headed to Haiti, an erstwhile French colony until 1804 and the only independent nation he visited during his trip, before ending his travelogue in Britain's then-largest West Indian colony, the island of Jamaica. Similarly to his later so-called 'trilogy' which would chart his interwar experiences crossing Europe and the Balkans, Leigh Fermor's Caribbean writings also portray the largely vanished world of European colonisation in the West Indies, given that all of the British-ruled islands he visited are now independent nations in their own right, and have been for the past five to six decades (Clarke and Brereton n. pg.).

Though, as mentioned previously, Leigh Fermor's writings are perhaps most commonly associated with the southeastern European context, it is interesting that his experiences in the West Indies were to provide the inspiration for what would be his only novel and the subject of the present analysis, *The Violins of Saint-Jacques*, which was

first published in 1953. As will be discussed in this article, the novel offers a deft portrait of idyllic colonial life on Saint-Jacques, a fictional French-ruled island which is ultimately destroyed by a catastrophic volcanic eruption. Running to just 137 pages in its 2004 paperback edition, the work is written in an elaborate style described by a contemporary critic as “a flamboyance enjoyed largely for its own sake, but controlled in the interests of the final effect” (Dobrée 643). Although the novel was even the basis for an opera of the same name by the British composer Malcolm Williamson (Payne 18), the book has received relatively scarce scholarly attention since its appearance. Accordingly, in linking with this issue’s thematic purview – and particularly with regard to representations of archetypal, literal, and metaphorical forms of fire in literature and culture, the aim of this contribution is therefore to examine the role that the island’s Salpetrière¹ volcano plays in the work. This analysis will be undertaken via descriptive close reading and interpretation of Leigh Fermor’s novel.

Brief remarks on volcanoes in literary fiction

Before continuing to the analysis of the novel itself, it is important to state that volcanoes and volcanic eruptions have often been a source of inspiration for writers (Sigurdsson and Lopes 1345). As part of a wider Spanish-language study on the role and influence of geology in fiction, the researcher and writer Jorge Ordaz Gargallo (77-8) lists several novels from world literature where volcanoes play direct or indirect roles in the setting or plot. As with Sigurdsson & Lopes’ chapter, *The Violins of Saint-Jacques* is naturally included, but the list also features several better-known works such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s landmark *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which earns its spot due to the volcano in Mordor. In addition, mindful of the impact of volcanic eruptions on literary creativity, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is also included, given the so-called influence of the real-life 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora and Europe’s ensuing ‘Year Without A Summer’ on the genesis of Shelley’s seminal creation. As such, whether directly or indirectly, important geological events such as volcanic eruptions can therefore be seen as a “*factor desencadenante o conclusivo*” [‘triggering or decisive factor’]² in the development of a given plot (Ordaz Gargallo 77), as this study of Leigh Fermor’s novel will demonstrate.

In terms of the analysis of more recent creative works, other studies have examined the impact of real-life volcanic eruptions on the production of literature and poetry. These include examples of literary works inspired by the ramifications of the 1995 eruptions of the Soufrière Hills (Skinner 73-80) on the small Caribbean island of Montserrat, a British-ruled overseas territory and which led to the abandonment and destruction of the island’s capital and the evacuation and relocation of a considerable number of the island’s inhabitants. Accordingly, the power wrought by dormant volcanoes also highlights the specific and unique vulnerability of islands to their potentially violent presence. In the

¹ The name translates to ‘saltpeter’, an explosive component fundamental in the manufacture of gunpowder (Cressy 1), as well as a fabled but erroneous means of curbing desires (Rich and Jacobs 164-65).

² Translation by the author of this article.

Caribbean context, given the region's seismicity and propensity to various natural disasters, the volcanic eruption on Leigh Fermor's fictional Saint-Jacques is reminiscent of the 1902 eruption of Mont Pelée on the French colony of Martinique (Duprat 10), which – similarly to Montserrat nine decades later – destroyed the island's main city, Saint-Pierre.

A further example from elsewhere, but again distinguished by the British colonial presence, was the 1961 evacuation of the remote South Atlantic island of Tristan da Cunha (Rodriguez 32-34). In this instance, the entire population was temporarily relocated to Britain as a result of an intense volcanic eruption which threatened their survival. As will be discussed with regard to the fictional Saint-Jacques, these cursory examples serve to illustrate how islands can not only be created by volcanic power (such as the memorable emergence of the island of Surtsey off the Icelandic coast in the 1960s – see Groenke 26), but also how this power can destroy them too.

The Shrove Tuesday masque and the eruption of the volcano

Leigh Fermor's only novel is told in the form of a story recounted to the nameless narrator, an expatriate living in Greece, on an island in the Aegean. The narrator's interlocutor is Berthe, a Frenchwoman advanced in years who now also resides on the island. In utilising this form of embedded narrative, the novel therefore alludes not only to the multiple canonical works which have used this device (such as Mary Shelley's aforementioned *Frankenstein* – see O'Dea, "Framing the Frame"), but also retains a sense of narrative distance, thereby regulating the flow of information featured and thus removing the reader from the dramatic – and almost fantastical – events that the story contains.

At the outset of the book, the narrator establishes that Berthe, as a young woman, had been one of the few survivors of the Saint-Jacques volcanic eruption. The beginning of Berthe's narrative opens with a comprehensively detailed historical, geographical, and cultural description of the island and its inhabitants. Though of course a fictional creation, Saint-Jacques is a colony of France and is located in the Lesser Antilles. Though the action of the story is not explicitly dated, reference to other temporal factors seems to place Berthe's narrative sometime in the 1890s, giving it a sense of languorous fin de siècle elegance during the twilight years of the nineteenth century.

As presented in this study, the island's Salpetrière volcano casts an immense figurative and metaphorical shadow from the beginning of Berthe's tale: "Above the town, a tropical forest rose in a cone, hiding to its crater the steep and concave flanks from whose blunt apex curled a languid blue-grey banner of smoke" (Leigh Fermor 15). Thus, its omnipresence dominates the principal events of the novel. Inextricably intertwined in terms of their temporal scope (a single evening), the first is the island's Shrove Tuesday masque, an enormous celebration organised by the colony's longstanding noble dynasty, the de Seridan family. This is followed by the second event, where the Salpetrière assumes the starring role: the volcano's spectacular eruption and the ensuing destruction and disappearance of the island amid an explosion of lava and flames.

A distant cousin of the de Seridans, young Berthe arrives on the island from

metropolitan France to live with her relatives and act as governess to her hosts’ younger children. The head of the household, the Count, is very much an aristocrat of the old style, and there are abundant references to happenings from past times, albeit with the omnipresent backdrop of the volcano: “How leisurely and remote it all sounded! The cohorts of negro servants, the balls, [...] the picnics by the ever-smouldering cone of the Salpetrière” (Leigh Fermor 18). In harking back to earlier times (i.e., presumably even to the pre-republican days of royal and imperial power), a sense of idyllic life is portrayed through rose-tinted spectacles. This notion is tinted with an avuncular sense of racial harmony between the island’s white, mixed, and black inhabitants, albeit strictly hierarchical with the de Seridans at the nominal top of the colony’s social pyramid. Interference from external parties (such as mainland France) is unwanted, as shown by the activities of the disliked prefect who attempts to impose his authority on the colony, but is sorely limited by the natural generational power and status invested by the island’s populace in the Count and his family.

As with many locations across the Americas, festivities in honour of Shrove Tuesday – or Mardi Gras – represent a time of celebration and excess before the privations of Lent. On Saint-Jacques, the Count’s legendary Shrove Tuesday ball was renowned as the social event of the year and, as the main preparations take place at his mansion, the Salpetrière provides a spectacular backdrop:

The day had ended in a flaunting sunset so apocalyptic [...] The volcano had been burning for the last week or so with unaccustomed vigour. Now it hung in the dark like a bright red torch, prompting the island wiseacres, mindful of the terrible eruptions that had coincided over a century ago with the fall of the Bastille, to shake their heads. (Leigh Fermor 39-40)

Indeed, though seemingly a clear portent of the impending doom, the islanders seem remarkably relaxed and focused on the upcoming celebrations. This is exemplified by the comments made by some members of the island’s black population, who are eagerly awaiting the Shrove Tuesday festivities: “‘Ga’dez Salpetrwière!’ the negros said joyfully to each other; ‘li pas faché, li fait bomba pou’ Ma’di Gras, comme nous’” (Leigh Fermor 40).³ Untranslated in the original text, the usage of the island’s unique French-based creole helps to underline how the threat of natural disaster is not taken seriously. Indeed, through resorting to the vernacular tongue, the use of the local patois with its distinctive rhotacism adds a comedic touch to the occasion as well as a degree of authenticity, mirroring other instances of Caribbean creole languages in literary works otherwise written in standard English (Hoyte-West 23).

Of course, the volcano’s activity does not subside. Subsequently, during the festivities whilst the orchestra is playing and the guests are dancing, “a deep and ominous rumble was heard [...]. A bright flash like lightning drowned the many candle flames for a second with its brighter intensity” (Leigh Fermor, *The Violins* 71). With the mansion

³ Translation by the author of this article: “Look at Salpetrwière” ... “it’s not angwy, it’s making noise for Ma’di Gras, just like us.”

and its environs lit up by chandeliers, burning torches, and other human-produced light sources, the contrast between the light produced by humankind with that from the natural world – i.e., from the volcano – is acute. In addition, through occurring at the specific moment when the orchestra is performing, it could also be advanced that the barbarity and power of nature contrasts with a symbol of European civilisation and culture, thereby echoing the classic dichotomy well-known from the Latin American context (Fishburn 301).

On the volcano “a sparkling fountain of fire had suddenly sprung [...]; a brilliant red gold needle [...] A wide stream of lava burnt its way down from the crater’s rim” (Leigh Fermor 72). Yet, continuing previous attitudes, the prelude to the eruption is still seen as a joke, as a mere trifle: “it looked as if the volcano itself were conspiring with the Count to add lustre” (Leigh Fermor 72). Thus, oblivious to the apparent danger, the various musical events and dancing continue as originally planned. Indeed, as the eruption progresses, cascades of ash fall out of the sky: “It was hotter than ever and the sinister volcanic snow was still silently falling” (Leigh Fermor 85), but the party still goes on.

Amid the joint disruption of the wild party and the eruption, Berthe discovers that her young cousin Josephine – the Count’s daughter to whom she is close both in age and in friendship – has left a note announcing that she plans to leave the island and elope with her lover, the son of the island’s hated prefect. In an attempt to find her relative before she escapes, Berthe leaves the party and heads from the mansion down into the town as the eruption continues to increase in intensity. Reaching the harbour despite the mayhem, Berthe eventually finds safety on a British-flagged vessel moored just off the coastline. On examining the island through a telescope, she discovers that:

The night had vanished. Everything was suddenly brighter than noonday and from the crater of the Salpetrière a broad pillar of red and white flame, thickly streaked with black, was shooting into the sky like the fire from a cannon’s mouth [...] The sea, reflecting the conflagration, leapt from the darkness in a smooth and vivid desert. (Leigh Fermor 118)

The impact of the volcanic eruption on the island is devastating, as Berthe observes that the “forests and the canefields were burning savagely in a score of places” (Leigh Fermor 119) and the “oily black convolutions” (120) of the lava “seemed to hang forward like the folds of a curtain, with a satanic light flickering in the changing pleats” (120). As such, the simile of lava as a curtain ensures that this portrait of the vivid destruction of the natural landscape appears quasi-theatrical; in other words, as though the final scene of a dramatic work is arriving at its conclusion. And although the island was covered in a volcanic cloud, the eruption contains important visual surprises: “All was suddenly light again. The sea was a brilliant disc [...] From the shore to the crest of the Salpetrière, the island was ablaze” (124). This is followed by a description of the gutted town, its streets “choked with a burning igneous rubble” as well as the “rivers of lava which flowed steaming and hissing into the sea” (125). Subsequently, when the outburst of volcanic activity has subsided, the end is nigh; rapidly but definitively, the island of Saint-Jacques

disappears under the surface of the sea. No trace of its existence is left, save for the lingering melodies of those titular violins which formed part of the Count’s orchestra. As the novel’s narrator informs Berthe at the conclusion of her story, their music can still be heard by any person “crossing the eastern channel between the islands [of Dominica and Guadeloupe] at carnival time”, where “the sounds of violins coming up through the water” is audible, as if “a ball were in full swing at the bottom of the sea” (Leigh Fermor 136).

Figurative and metaphorical aspects of the volcano

With the aim of this contribution being to examine the role of the Salpetrière volcano and its eruption as a fiery leitmotif in Leigh Fermor’s novel, it undoubtedly represents a dramatic backdrop to the Shrove Tuesday festivities, highlighting this frivolous period of excess and hedonism. Then as now, the carnival period is particularly vibrant in the Caribbean, showcasing its panoply of ethnic, cultural, and religious influences from various sources. Yet, as with carnival festivities elsewhere (Godet 3-5), the period can be also viewed as potentially subversive, with the presence of masks, fire, and flames, embodying shifting identities. Accordingly, by occurring at this seminal time, it can be advanced that the eruption thereby not only highlights the liminality of Saint-Jacques but also – by virtue of the island’s different social norms compared to elsewhere – as a place of transgression.

Though long-expected, the eruption of Salpetrière represents a cataclysmic event in the novel. In this regard, the stirring volcano can be said to arguably symbolise the changing times – with the advent of the twentieth century, Saint-Jacques is clearly an anachronism, and its inability to enter the modern age leads to its destruction. By clinging to old customs – for example, as demonstrated by the timeless stability of the white creole elite (as personified by the de Seridan family) and their seemingly harmonious relationship to islanders of mixed and African descent – lingering racial hierarchies persist even after the abolition of slavery. Accordingly, as is ultimately shown by its disappearance, the island’s unique culture and society simply cannot survive.

It is additionally notable that Salpetrière’s previous eruption occurred at the time of the fall of the Bastille and the beginning of the French Revolution. The events of 1789 ushered in an era of immense political, social, and ideological change, upending the *ancien régime* and leading to profound repercussions not only for France and its colonial possessions, but also for Europe and the world. Though the changing power structures and the dissemination of revolutionary ideology contributed to catalysing slave uprisings in French-ruled Caribbean colonies such as Guadeloupe and – notably – Saint-Domingue (Geggus 29-33), Leigh Fermor’s Saint-Jacques seems to have escaped these upheavals, with its inhabitants living in a tranquil idyll largely unmarked by the vicissitudes of the long nineteenth century, an existence annihilated by the fatal volcanic eruption.

In this regard, the violins of the Count’s orchestra – destroyed by the eruption but, as mentioned earlier, which still retain a ghostly presence in the waters where the island was once situated – are also emblematic of the disappearance of the old order. In addition to serving as a symbol of European culture, the presence of these violins in the

Francophone context naturally alludes to the famed ensemble *Les vingt-quatre violons du Roi*, the royal string orchestra at Versailles which was particularly associated with Louis XIV during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Centre de Musique Baroque, “Les vingt-quatre violons”). And, by being associated with the islanders’ complete inattention to the unfolding natural disaster, the violin motif also brings to mind the famous aphorism of the emperor Nero, who was memorably said to have played the fiddle whilst Rome burned. With a leading dictionary defining this idiom as “enjoy[ing] yourself or continu[ing] working as normal and not giv[ing] any attention to something important and unpleasant that is happening that you should be taking action to prevent” (*Cambridge Dictionary* n. pg.), this is certainly accurate given the behaviour of the Seridan family and the other inhabitants of Saint-Jacques in the face of the imminent eruption.

It is also important to contextualise the period when Leigh Fermor wrote his only novel. At the time of his travels to the Caribbean, the region was seeing the rise of self-rule and independence movements, particularly among the British possessions, as the various colonies sought to free themselves from imperial strictures. As noted earlier on, the novel evokes strong nostalgia for the past (Malley 449-450), as demonstrated by the rich, archaic prose redolent of an earlier era (Dobrée 643-645). In sum, the untimely fate of Saint-Jacques could perhaps be said to be a harbinger of the potential end of colonialism, with the majority of the former British West Indies ultimately choosing to pursue the path of independence during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Notably, however, France still retains its Caribbean footholds up to the present day, which have largely been incorporated as overseas departments or territories.

Conclusion

In sum, the Salpetrière volcano plays a multifaceted role in *The Violins of Saint-Jacques*. Its explosive power demonstrates the vulnerability of island societies to external forces, be they natural disasters or evolving ideological currents. Though the Caribbean is no stranger to cities which have been obliterated by the power of nature, as the real-life examples from Martinique and Montserrat have illustrated, Leigh Fermor’s deep knowledge of Greece and its language and culture means it is doubtless that the old myth of Atlantis and its disappearing civilisation (Jarosz 43-45) are also echoed in the destruction of Saint-Jacques and its society. Indeed, Emily Greenwood’s analysis of *The Traveller’s Tree* highlights how “in [Leigh Fermor’s] travels around the Caribbean archipelago he takes his bearings from the Greek archipelago with which he was familiar” (Greenwood 23), noting that via his “Hellenic analogies, Greece is superimposed onto the Caribbean, making the latter superficially recognizable and intelligible” (Greenwood 26). Therefore, in representing a bellwether of changing times and attitudes and drawing on multiple cultural influences and symbols, the volcano in *The Violins of Saint-Jacques* is a fundamental and indelible part of this beguiling work, whose wealth of thematic material keenly awaits further exploration.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Citation: Hoyte-West, A. “A blinding and incandescent ball of light”: The volcano and its eruption in Patrick Leigh Fermor’s *The Violins of Saint-Jacques*. *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 15(1), 2025: 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.15.1.1>

Received: August 11, 2025 | **Accepted:** September 28, 2025 | **Published:** October 9, 2025

