Exit That Awkward Conversation

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The Quake That Shook Europe

This Gulf of Fire
By Mark Molesky
(Knopf, 496 pages, $35)

The "destiny" of Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis was—so Voltaire gushed—"to determine the shape of the world." When Maupertuis set out to take measurements amid Arctic ice in 1736, he thought every truth was quantifiable and every fact could be tested. By the time of his death in 1759, he suspected that the world is illusory and that "perhaps only God exists." His mental pilgrimage between certainty and doubt, rationalism and revelation, reproduced in miniature the history of 18th-century Europe. First, the perfection of humans, the infallibility of reason and the sufficiency of science kindled common assumptions. Then Enlightenment flickered, as intellectuals redrew the balance of feelings over reason and of religion over minds. What part the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 played in subverting such optimism has long been a subject of debate. Mark Molesky, a history professor who knows everything worth knowing about the quake, is—one might think—the man to settle the question. Together with the tidal wave and great fire that followed, the shock was Europe's most destructive natural disaster on record, reducing to ruins a sumptuous capital of 200,000 people.

The detail with which Mr. Molesky relates events from the first tremors to the last aftershocks is almost equally crushing, but fluent prose and vivid vignettes keep the reader engaged.

Hundreds of pages of agonizing immolations, hair's-breadth escapes, opportunistic crimes and savage punishments make compelling reading. The author makes light work of the complexities of seismology (though he wavers between rival locations for the hypocenter of the quake). He helps show how Lisbon was more vulnerable geologically than other cities closer to the quake. He is also good at distinguishing self-romanticized memoirists from true heroes, such as Gen. Maia (who helped redesign the city) or António Ribeiro Sanches (who emerged from the ruins as a prophet of public health) or the "half-mad Irish beggar woman" who "ran headlong into the fire" and "returned unscathed with a bottle of wine" to share with a distressed English heretic.

Unfortunately, the litany of death and destruction leaves the author little time or space to confront big historical questions. Turning points are unfashionable among historians, who have lost all faith that history reda a course or direction, and Mr. Molesky is unsure how much importance he wants to attribute to his subject. At one point he avers that the quake was "largely forgotten" by the 1760s.

Yet he also says it was "a true crossroads in the history of the West." It occasioned "the most significant intellectual controversy of the European Enlightenment," over whether earthquakes were divine or natural but seems almost instantly to have decided the question in nature's favor. In other respects, Mr. Molesky exaggerates the quake's influence. Following the disaster, natural history seemed to align with political radicalism, yet Voltaire forfeited "the Puckish swagger of his youth" and turned from politics to cultivating his garden.

No disaster in recorded history compared to the Lisbon cataclysm. Some asked why God allowed such evil. Others saw it as divine punishment.
Mr. Molesky paints a dolorous picture of the decadence of the pre-earthquake city, where King João V had an insatiable sexual appetite for nuns. Luxury (at least in memories warped by disaster) invited divine reproof. But the contrast between two dystopias—the soigné Gomorrah of the first half of the century and the puritanical wasteland that succeeded it—may be overdrawn. The old king was already turning heavenward and seeking repentance before he died.

Religious reaction—self-flagellation, madcap mass confessions, baptisms and “harassing the dying with religious ceremonies”—set in almost as soon as people felt the tremors. Survivors consoled themselves with assurances of “God's righteous disgust” at the victims, especially if the latter were Jews or Muslims. In the end, Mr. Molesky opines, optimism survived the disaster.

Yet “if the Age of Reason had not yet superseded the Age of Faith, Lisbon did much to boost the latter.” Clerical authority actually grew because donors to aid funds believed that the clergy “knew where the greatest need existed.” Even Brazil—the Protestant kingdom—was abashed enough to observe a “General Fast” and architect Robert Adam, hoping for prefigure amid the ruins, proclaimed the disaster, albeit ironically, “a heavenly judgement on my behalf.”

For a while, at least, secularism did seem to rule over the ruins, in the person of the reputedly anti-clerical dictator and Machiavellian arriviste the Marquês de Pombal. No less than the earthquake, Pombal was “a force of nature,” a “fourth tremor” that shook Portugal into new configurations. In Mr. Molesky’s vivid portrayal, Pombal’s hatreds were personal: of Jesuits, with whom he had studied unrewardingly at Coimbra; of the charismatic tub-thumper, Friar Malagrida, whose influence with the royal family the marquis resented and revenged; of the noble snobs who snubbed him, and whom he suppos edly crushed as effectively as the earthquake crushed their palaces. He was “at war with Portugal’s past,” Mr. Molesky writes. Seeking both to “civilize . . . and enslave,” he ruled with “features of totalitarianism.” The Portuguese authorities ruthlessly censored divine explanations of the quake, while political and economic calculations, not humanitarian concerns or sacred scruples, determined the provenance and level of international aid.

Apart from an ill-advised, awkwardly compressed and quite inaccurate excursion of some 30 pages into Portugal’s history since the Paleolithic era, Mr. Molesky’s story is well-informed and well-paced. For those who feel beleaguered amid America’s current culture wars, it presents an object lesson. The religious will find comfort in the model of a happy issue from bloody and shattering afflictions. Secularists may feel the example is condign: Pombal died disgraced, in rural exile, “covered with oozing pustules,” while churches reared over the former ruins and congregations returned to prayer.

Mr. Fernández-Armesto, a professor at Notre Dame, is the author, most recently, of “A Foot in the River: Why Our Lives Change—and the Limits of Evolution.”