The Vicar and the Earthquake: Conflict, Controversy, and a Christening during the Great Lisbon Disaster of 1755

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Abstract

This article examines five letters written by Richard Goddard, an Anglican pastor from Swindon, England and a survivor of the Lisbon earthquake. Produced on faded paper in a legible cursive script, they offer a personal, detailed, and highly revealing description of the events of All Saints’ Day (November 1) 1755, discussing not only the earthquake and tsunami, but also the great fire that began almost immediately after the first tremor and burned for more than a week. In one notable and well publicized episode at the time, Reverend Goddard is forcibly baptized into the Catholic Church by a crowd of pious Lisboetas in the hour after the earthquake.

Keywords

Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, Richard Goddard, anti-Catholicism, religious toleration, eighteenth century; natural disaster

Resumo

Este artigo analisa cinco cartas escritas por Richard Goddard de Swindon, Inglaterra, um pastor anglicano e um sobrevivente do terramoto de Lisboa. Produzido em papel desbotado, em escrita cursiva legível, eles oferecem uma descrição pessoal, detalhada e altamente reveladora dos eventos do Dia de Todos os Santos (1 de Novembro) de 1755, discutindo não só o terramoto e tsunami, mas também o grande incêndio que começou quase imediatamente depois do primeiro tremor e continuou durante mais de uma semana. Num episódio notável e bem divulgado na época, o Reverend Goddard foi batizado à força na Igreja Católica por uma multidão de Lisboetas devotos na primeira hora após o terramoto.

Palavras-chave

Terramoto de Lisboa de 1755; Richard Goddard; anti-catolicismo; tolerância religiosa; século XVIII; desastre natural

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The Lisbon Earthquake of November 1, 1755 was a cataclysm of decidedly international impact. Originating along a fault line several hundred kilometers southeast of Cape St. Vincent in the Atlantic Ocean—and registering between 8.5 and 9.1 on the moment magnitude scale ($M_w$)—the mega-quake was felt across much of western Europe and the northwest coast of Africa, while the resultant tsunami ravaged stretches of the Spanish, Portuguese, and Moroccan shoreline, sending shock waves as far as England, Ireland, Canada, Brazil, and the West Indies. Much of the damage and most of the deaths, however, occurred in Lisbon, the capital of a vast trading empire and home to a large and diverse community of foreign merchants, craftsmen, and sailors. In the aftermath of the disaster, many of the survivors of this non-native population wrote home to inform family, friends, and business associates of their survival and recount their experiences. These foreign accounts constitute a sizeable proportion of all extant eyewitness testimonies to the earthquake. Unfortunately, many remain unstudied (or undiscovered) in archives and personal collections throughout the world.

This article will comment on five letters written by earthquake eyewitness Richard Goddard, the vicar of Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire, UK. Produced on faded paper in a clear cursive script, they present a detailed and deeply personal description of the events of All Saints’ Day (November 1) 1755, discussing not only the earthquake and tsunami, but also the great fire, which began almost immediately after the first tremor and burned without interruption for more than a week. Unlike the vast majority of eyewitness accounts which offer a single composite view of the tragedy, Goddard’s letters follow the progression of events in Lisbon over a period of several months, providing a valuable new perspective on each stage of the tragedy and its aftermath.

Most significantly, they offer a unique window into the world of British Lisbon, as seen through the eyes of a visiting brother of a local British merchant. Of particular interest is an intriguing episode in which Goddard, a Protestant minister, is forcibly baptized into the Roman Catholic Church by a crowd of fervent Portuguese earthquake survivors immediately after the disaster. Illustrative of the complex and precarious relationship with several notable exceptions (António Pereira de Figueiredo’s *Commentario Latino e Portuguez Sobre o Terremoto e o Incêndio de Lisboa*, Joachim José Moreira de Mendonça’s *História Universal dos Terremotos*, Miguel Tibério Pedegache’s *Nova e Fiel Relação que Experimentou Lisboa, e Todo Portugal no 1 de Novembro de 1755*, and Manoel Portal’s *História da Ruina [...]*, only a few Lisboetas who survived the earthquake felt the need to commit their personal experiences to paper in any extended fashion. The reasons for this remain unclear. Perhaps the shared nature of the disaster among survivors (the earthquake was felt throughout Portugal and the tsunami impacted almost the entire Portuguese coastline), as well as the fact that many people fled to the homes of relatives across the country, made such communication unnecessary. Lisboetas did, however, produce a substantial quantity of poems, essays, histories, and commentaries on the earthquake disaster.

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3 Richard Goddard was the vicar of Lacock from 1753 until his death on May 2, 1758.