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The Valley of 10,000 Smokes: Revisiting the Alaskan Sublime

Photographs and text by Gary Freeburg
with essays by John Eichelberger and Jeanne M. Schaaf

On June 6, 1912, an unforgettable natural event occurred: the largest volcanic eruption on Earth during the twentieth century. In size comparable to Indonesia's Krakatau (Krakatoa) in 1883, one must go back 2,000 years to the north island of New Zealand to find as large a release of rhyolite magma.

The actual eruption took place about 100 miles west of Kodiak in the Aleutian Range on the Alaskan Peninsula. In three days, a new volcano—Novarupta—was born. More than five cubic miles of ash and debris flew 100,000 feet into the atmosphere, and heavier deposits filled an adjacent forty-four-square-mile valley in depths up to 1,000 feet. The dense, superheated waves of magmatic spray incinerated all living organisms, leaving a hot bed of igneous material that, when mixed with water from the surrounding glaciers and snowfields, produced tens of thousands of steam vents known as fumaroles. Thus was born the Valley of 10,000 Smokes. Native villages, some thousands of years old, were abandoned and never reestablished.

The eruption was of such consequence that the National Geographic Society sent Robert F. Griggs to direct a four-year expedition to the site, beginning in 1915. After seeing "the steaming valley" for the first time, Griggs exclaimed: "The first glance was enough to assure us that we had stumbled in another Yellowstone Park..." Today, scientists from around the world consider the Valley of 10,000 Smokes to be the Holy Grail of volcanology, because of the size, complexity, and composition of the 1912 eruption.

Following in the footsteps of Griggs, Gary Freeburg has traveled to the Valley of 10,000 Smokes five times (from 2000 to 2011) in pursuit of photographing one of Earth's most raw and remote wild places. Although the 10,000 fumaroles are largely gone, in Freeburg's stunning photographs one can still feel the steam-filled air, sense the deafening noise of the eruption, and grasp the incredible physical forces that created this alluring landscape. Now preserved as part of the 4.7-million-acre Katmai National Park and Preserve, the Valley of 10,000 Smokes continues to inspire—not just esteemed volcanologists such as John Eichelberger and expert archeologists such as Jeanne M. Schaaf, who contribute essays to the book, but also great artists such as Gary Freeburg who seek out Nature's secrets in the Alaskan sublime.

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PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

"Gary Freeburg is no casual tourist in the Valley of 10,000 Smokes. His images—every bit as sublime as his subtitle promises in their beauty and terror—were hard won over years of earned intimacy. And yet the book is more even than the images, with its superb work of contextualizing the history of the Griggs expeditions of 1916–1919 and with enlightened essays on geology by John Eichelberger and on culture by Jeanne Schaaf. As Freeburg followed in the footsteps of Griggs, we follow Freeburg from the safety of our armchairs, our eyes filled with awe and wonder."
—David Stevenson, Director, M.F.A in Creative Writing and Literary Arts Department, University of Alaska Anchorage



"Gary Freeburg's stunning—I mean knock-you-on-the-head stunning—photographs of the Valley of 10,000 Smokes in Alaska reveal not only its austere beauty, but its ongoing dynamism. Freeze-thaw, bear tracks, glacial turmoil, wild rivers...There's enough magic in these photographs and accompanying text to satisfy all readers."
—Denis Wood, co-author of *Making Maps* and *Rethinking the Power of Maps*

"*The Valley of 10,000 Smokes* by Gary Freeburg, photographer, and essays by John Eichelberger and Jeanne M. Schaaf is an interesting book of reflections on our planet and the meanings and inspirations we can draw from observing changes in natural environments. Freeburg journeyed to a very remote part of Alaska surrounding Mt. Novarupta, which erupted in the fourth largest volcano every recorded and caused the collapse of Mt. Katmai in June of 1912. Soon after that eruption an expedition went to study the area and photograph it, and as a result President Woodrow Wilson made it Katmai National Park and Preserve. Freeburg and his team returned there a century later to study and photograph the same area, forever changed by the volcano, although some of the terrain still has smoking fumaroles. The black-and-white photos from a century ago and the color ones which are current make an unusual and informative collection to compare the landscapes. The essays that accompany the photographs are thought provoking and well written." —Bonnie Neely, from her four-star book review for Amazon



"At the height of the Vietnam War, Gary Freeburg sits in a Buddhist rock garden on military leave to Japan in 1971. He visits the garden every day, each time struck by the way the sand shifts, while the stones remain stationary. 'As I sat there, I didn't think about the war; I didn't think about what was going on around me: this garden absorbed so much of my attention.' It was at this moment that Gary realised, 'In desolation, there is beauty.' Gary carries this idea with him today, as he photographs volcanic regions in Alaska, particularly the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, a 44-square mile landscape of volcanic ash and pumice buried 1,000 feet deep. From the formation of this new earth surface, Gary sees balance, a site

of shapes, shadows, textures: a 'giant geological garden of contemplation,' he says." —Laura Weeks, *Landscape Photography Magazine*

"Greatness can exist, in and of itself, as simply the supersized extreme of whatever metric is used for quantification—great size, great weight, great wealth, great distance. To attain the level of sublime, however—that mythical, mysterious quality of greatness—takes more than just counting preponderance plus some. It's the heightened realization that only comes from appreciating what's there from what's missing. In Southwest Alaska's Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, and Gary Freeburg's photography of it, experiencing the sublime of what is comes from the contrast of what is not." —Jenny Neymanf, *The Redoubt Report*

"This horizontal-format book showcases the black-and-white and color landscape photographs of Gary Freeburg, following in the footsteps of National Geographic explorer Robert F. Griggs. Selections from the photographs of Griggs's 1915-19 expeditions to Alaska are shown in the first section and throughout the essay sections of the book. The whole is finely produced by George F. Thompson Publishing. Most of the book is filled with Freeburg's photographs. Each is given a full page with plenty of white space and a facing page carrying small captions. The interspersed essays are by John Eichelberger and Jeanne M. Schaaf



and tell the story of the Griggs expeditions, with meditations on the volcanic landscape. Griggs's original four-year exploration of this area was the result of the second-largest volcanic eruption in modern times, comparable only to the explosion of Kratatoa. It resulted in the formation of a new volcano, which drew the interest of the public and the National Geographic Society. The icy, steaming desert Griggs and his team documented in the first decade of the twentieth century, and Freeburg documents in the first decade of the twenty-first, is called the Valley of 10,000 Smokes. The Griggs expeditions' photos are remarkable. Freeburg has the skill to equal them without matching them. His palette of silver grays is similar, but his pictures look up rather than down on these rugged mountains. In the original photographs, steam appears white, and human figures appear black, but both seem equally hazy and temporary. Freeburg offers a more monumental aesthetic. Contrasts between foreground and background, frozen in deep field, converse equally well in black-and-white or color, and all signs of life except the evidence of the photograph are absent."

—Eithne O'Leyne, Editor, *Reference & Research Books News* of Book News, Inc.

"Gary Freeburg's photographs of the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes are awe-inspiring, but understanding the surreal setting created by one of the largest volcanic eruptions in history requires a trip there. Dr. George C. Johnson was up for the challenge and the two James Madison University faculty members, each with over 40 years of experience as photographic artists, found a way to blend their shared awe of the power of nature's wilderness to record life in one of Earth's harshest, yet beautiful places."

"Since their trip to the Valley was fairly brief, the men took advantage of the 19 hours of sunlight each day during the summer solstice to shoot images that formed the basis for Freeburg's book, *The Valley of 10,000 Smokes: Revisiting the Alaskan Sublime*, from George F. Thompson Publishing, and Johnson's 30-minute documentary, *An Artist's Journey to the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes: The Photography of Gary Freeburg*, which chronicles what happened in 1912 and explains the geology of the Valley before showing what Freeburg endures to capture images." (Article on the James Madison University Website)

