



HKU  
BUSINESS  
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港大經管學院

# The Power of Serendipity

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With Project Chambers

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## Horace Walpole



**Horace Walpole  
coined the word  
serendipity in a  
letter to another  
Horace – Horace  
Mann - on  
January 28 1754**

# Serendipity in History

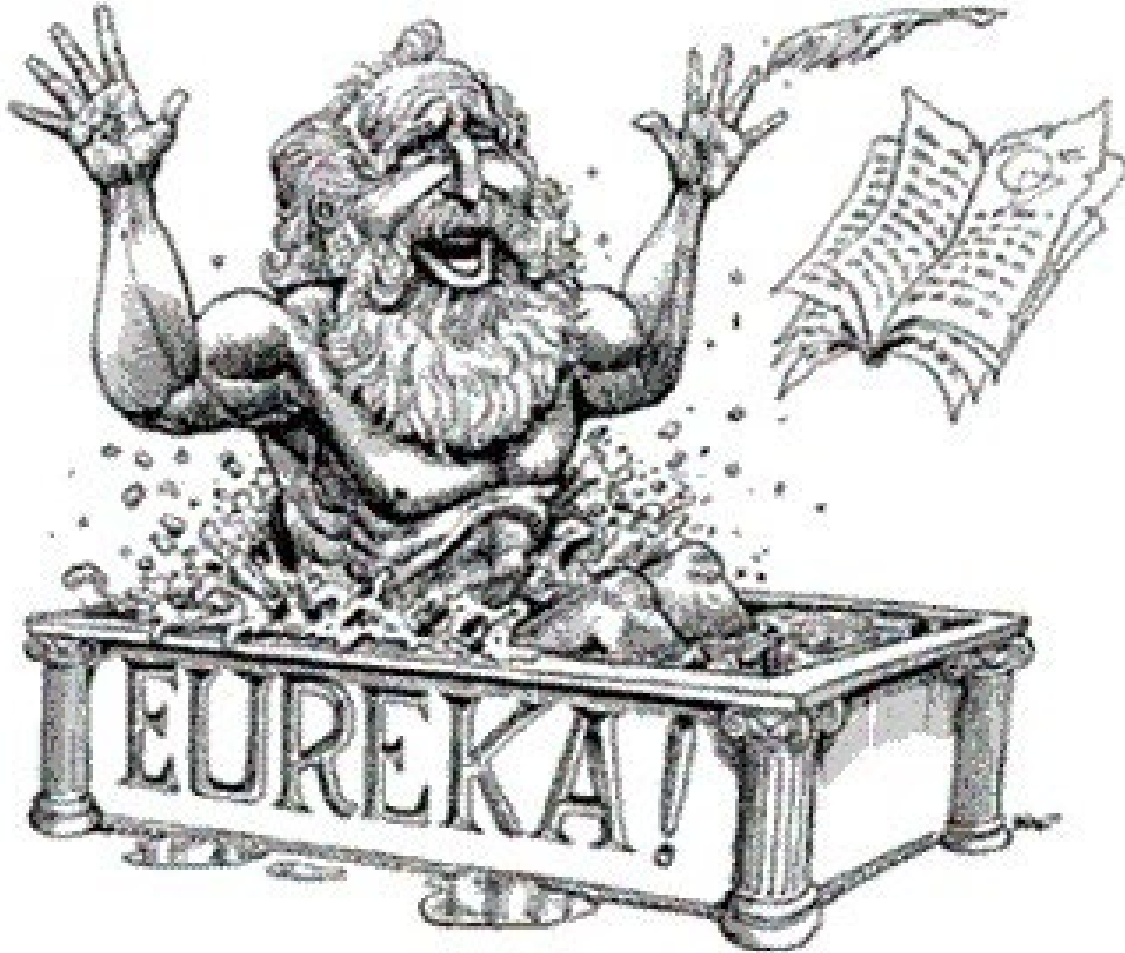


## The Three Princes of Serendip

**“Remember the Three Princes of Serendip who went out looking for treasure? They didn’t find what they were looking for, but they kept finding things just as valuable. That’s Serendipity”.**

*George W. Bush*

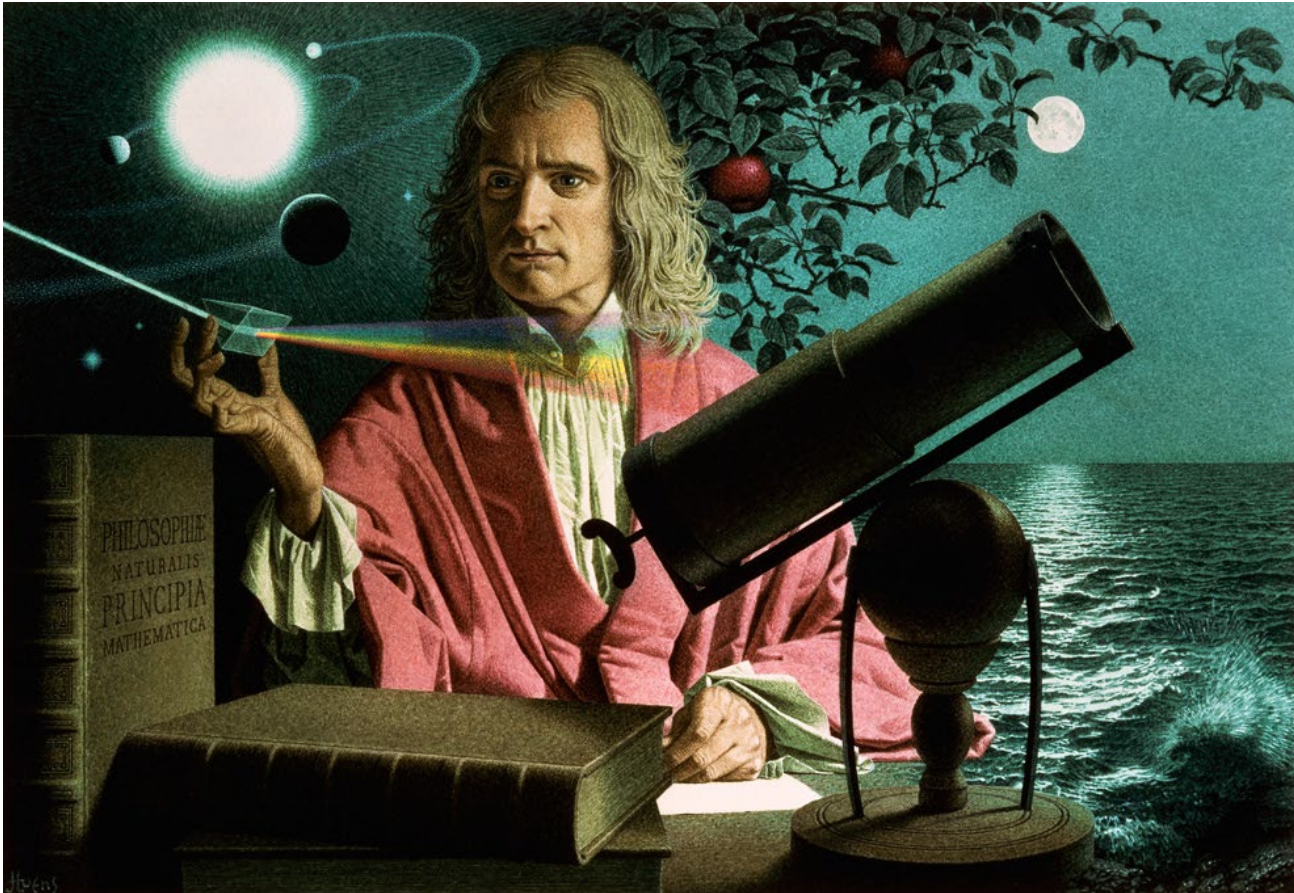
## Serendipitous moments in History



**Archimedes:  
Eureka, Around 250BC**



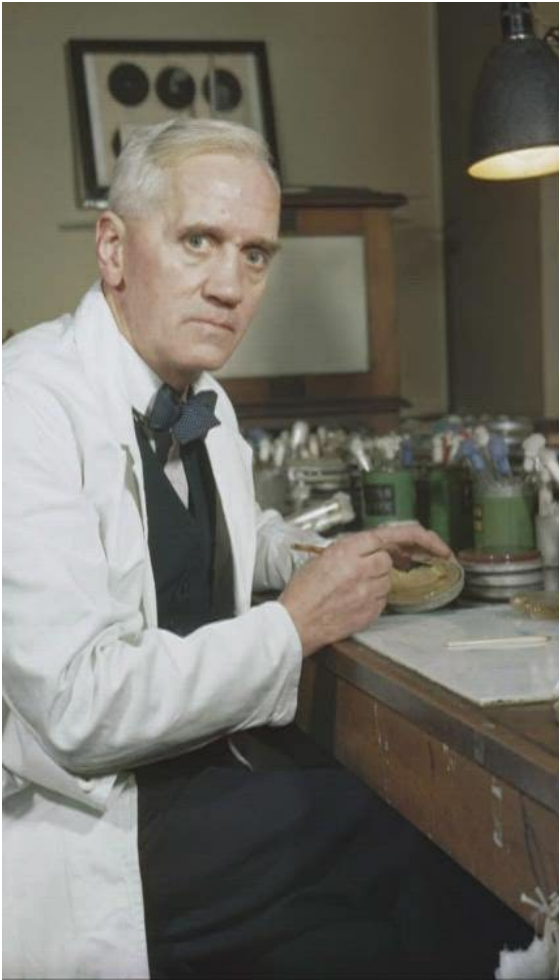
## Serendipitous moments in History



**Isaac Newton:  
Gravity and falling  
apples, 1756:**

**He first thought of his system  
of gravitation as he observed  
an apple fall from a tree in his  
garden in Woolsthorpe**

## Serendipitous moments in History



### Alexander Fleming

Carelessly left open a petri dish when he went on holiday from St Mary's Hospital in London in 1928.

He returned to find mould that had destroyed bacteria in the petri dish – and discovered penicillin



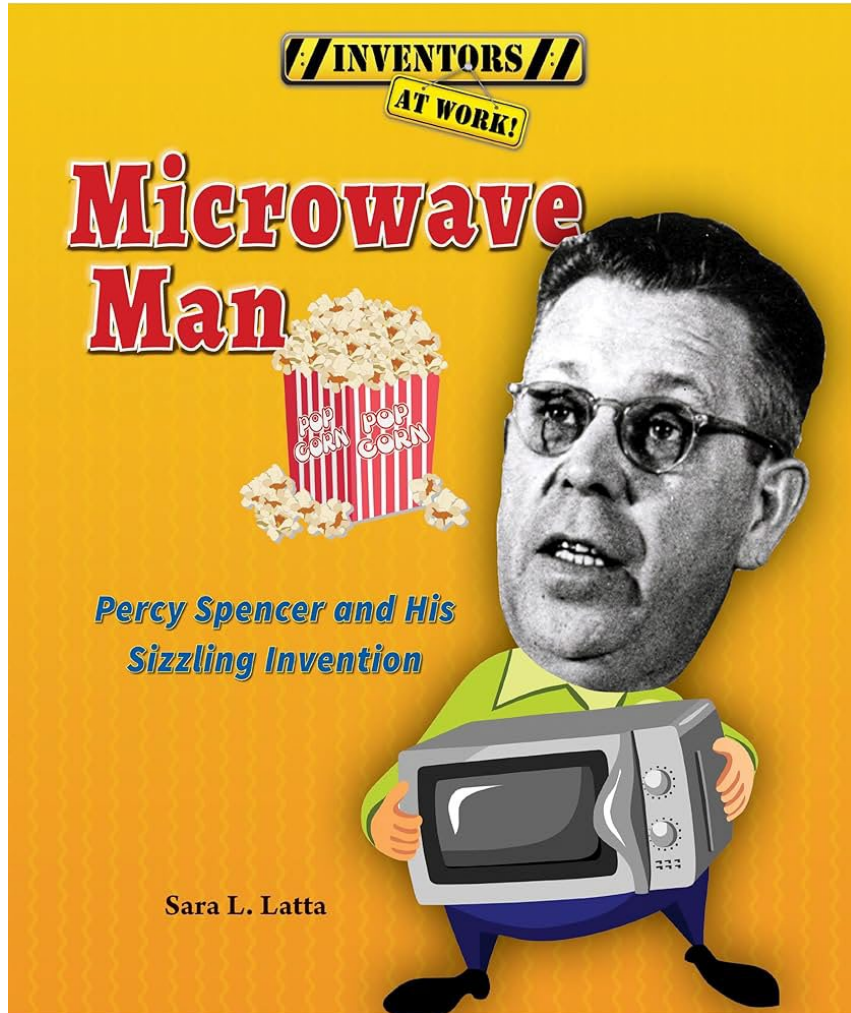
## Serendipitous moments in History



### Wilhelm Roentgen

German physicist who in 1895 was working on cathode tubes. Despite covering the machine in paper to stop light escaping, he found a mysterious incandescent green light that could pass through most substances, and was projecting onto a fluorescent screen nearby. His accidental discovery of Xrays earned him a Nobel Prize in 1905

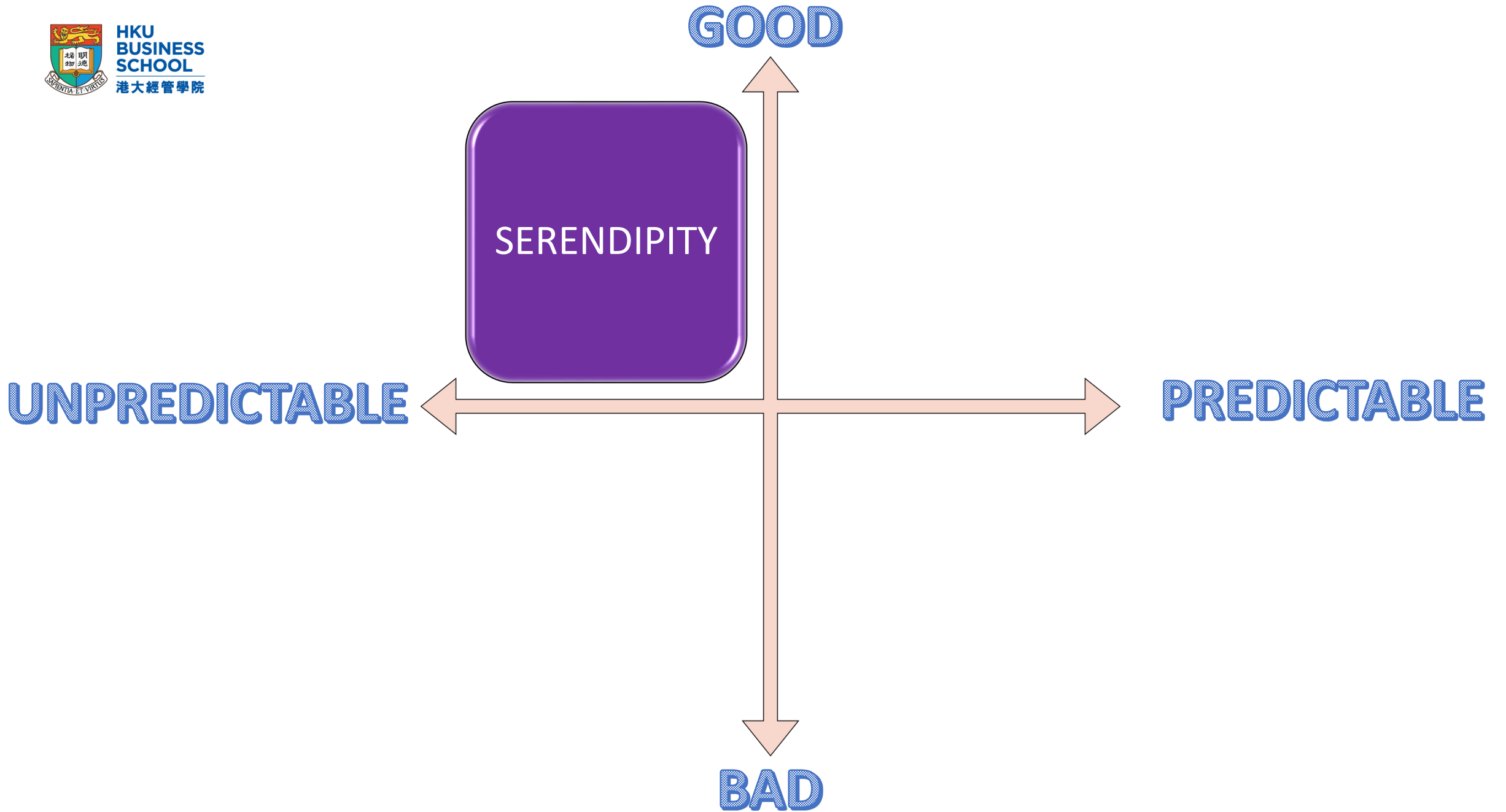
## Serendipitous moments in History

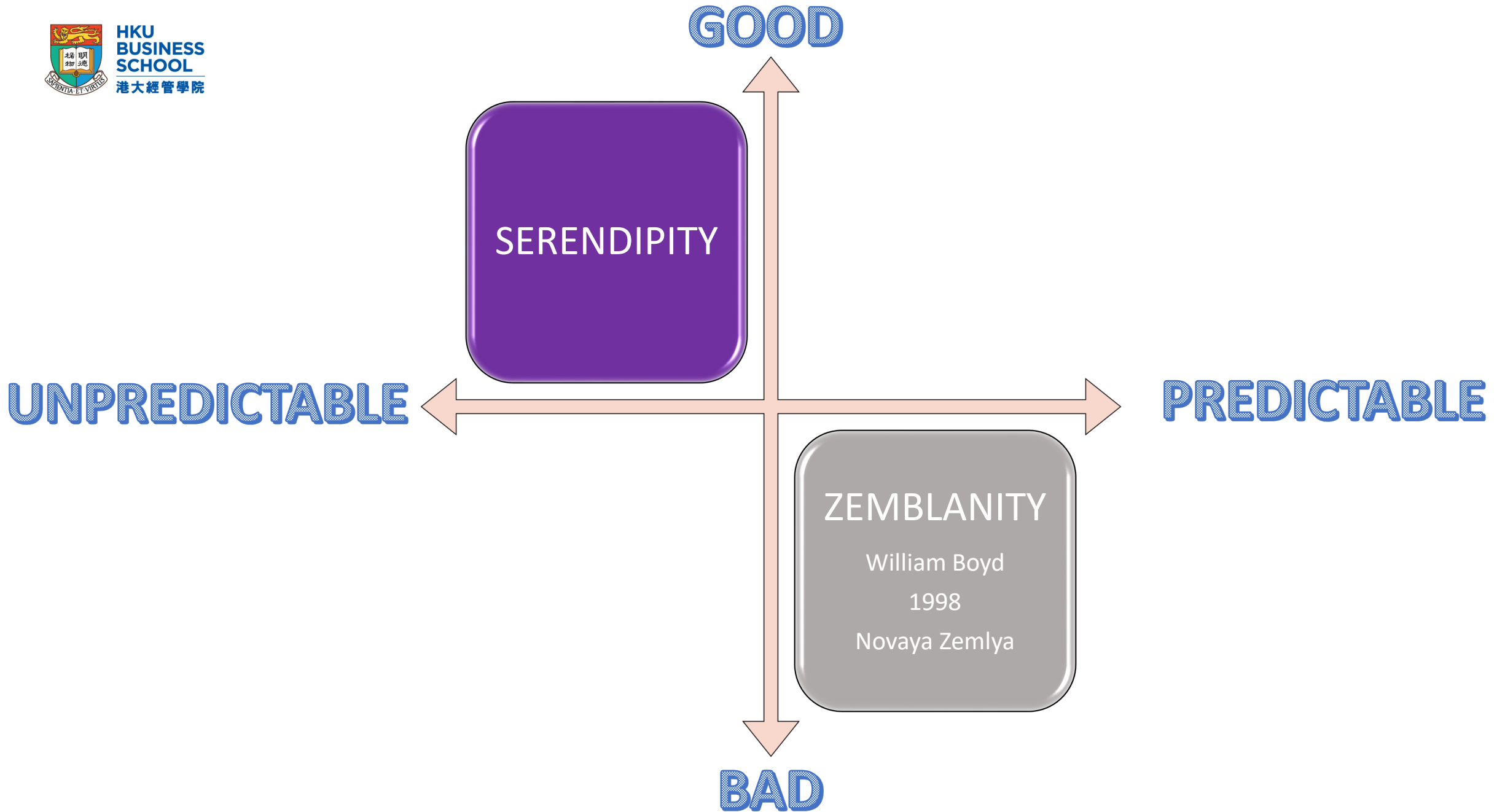


### Percy Spencer at Raytheon, 1947

Discovered how microwaves could cook food when a cookie bar in his pocket melted as he was working.. The first thing his microwave oven cooked was popcorn







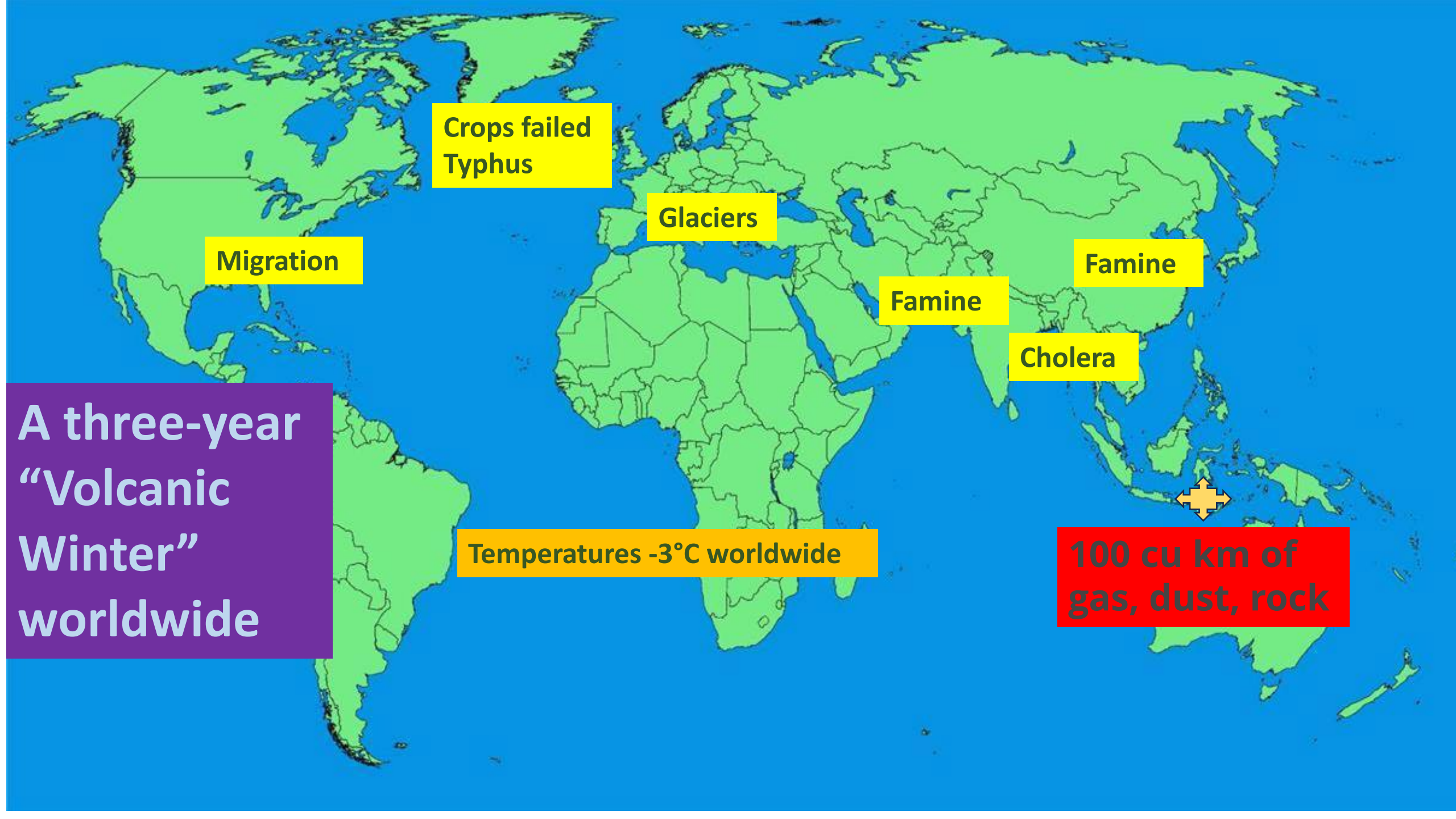
## A Story: Tambora





# April 5 1815





Crops failed  
Typhus

Glaciers

Migration

Famine

Famine

Cholera

A three-year  
"Volcanic  
Winter"  
worldwide

Temperatures -3°C worldwide

100 cu km of  
gas, dust, rock



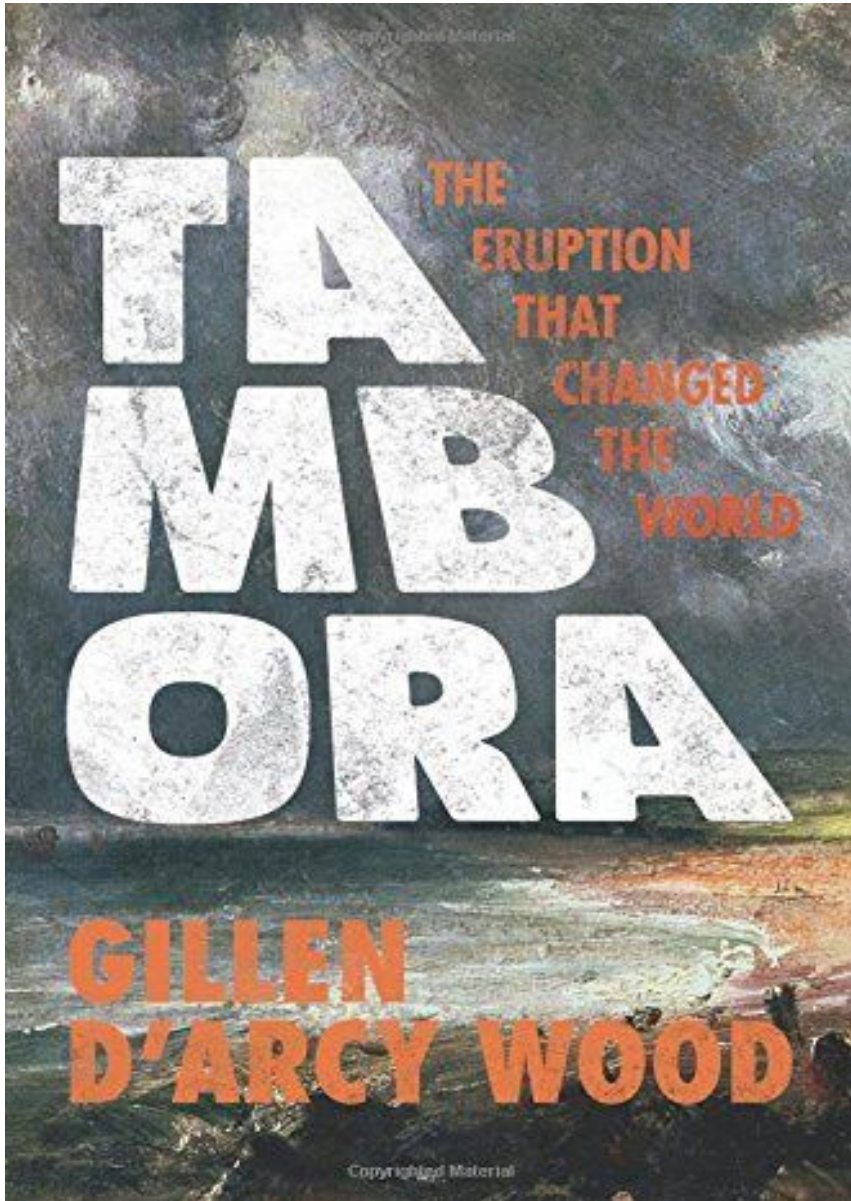
# Weird Sunsets



**Not just Famines and plagues:**

- **Weird sunsets**
- **Mary Shelley wrote “Frankenstein”**
- **Glaciers flooded out from the Alps**
- **People worldwide wondered what was going on**
- **Uncounted millions died**





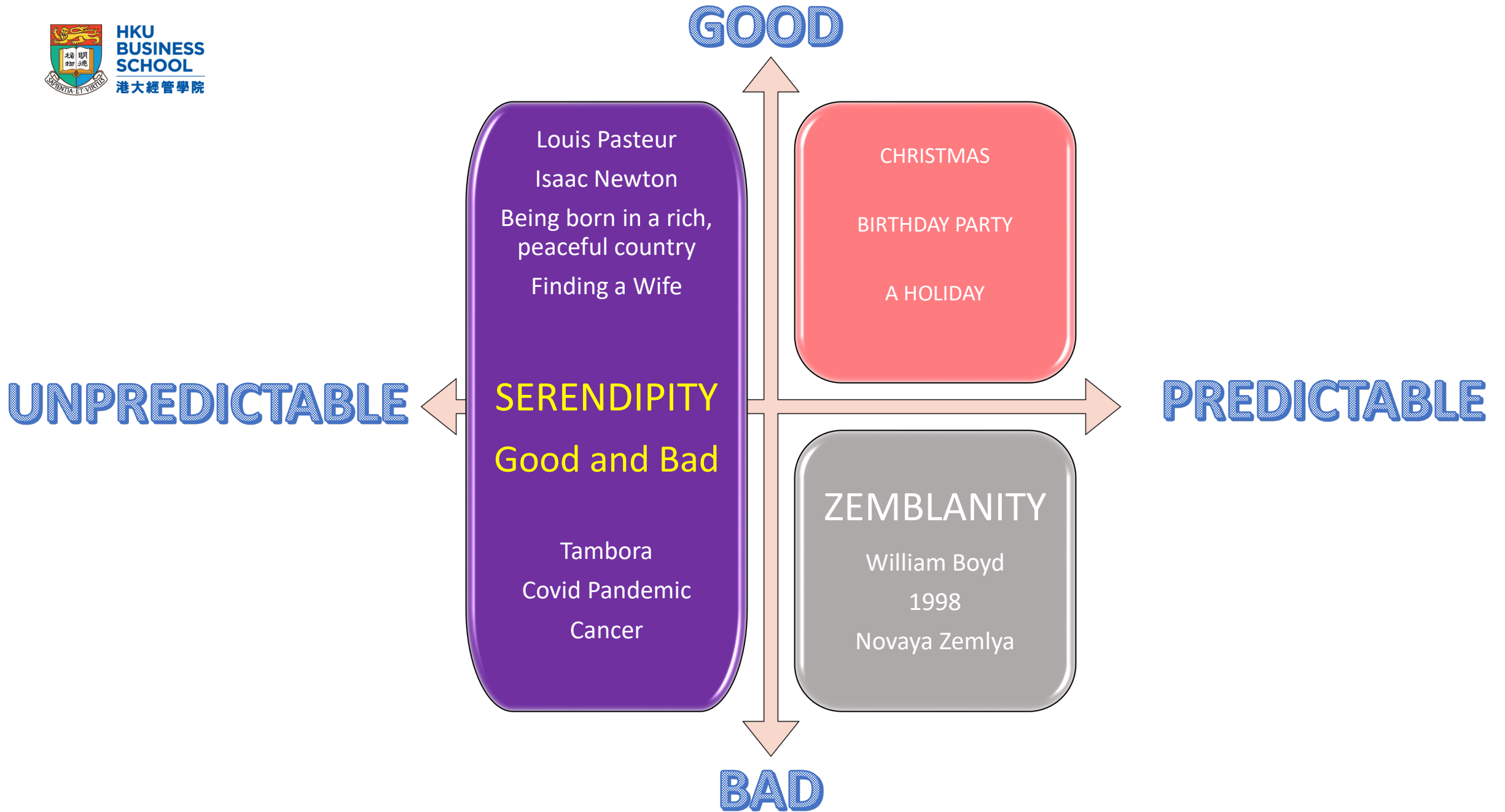
## What if Tambora happened today?

What are world food reserves today?

How many worldwide would die?

Fearsome impact of an entirely serendipitous event

Puts Covid Pandemic in perspective



## Why teach a course on Serendipity?

- Too many students think life can be meticulously planned
- Too few recognize that Serendipitous events are by far more likely to shape personal and business futures...
- .... both for **good** and for **bad**
- Serendipity in science: Powerful force for innovation and creativity
- Serendipity in business: Google; Steve Jobs: “creative spaces”
- In our current era of “polycrisis”, serendipitous forces are set to be more powerful and disruptive than ever.
- Louis Pasteur at University of Lille, 1854:  
**“chance favours only the prepared mind”**
- At heart, the course was intended to help students prepare for the inevitable unexpectable forces that will shape their lives, careers



## **Serendipity: my own personal journey**

- **Working class Grantham: where you grow up is VERY important**
- **Pakistan “Gap Year”**
- **New University: New degree: Social Anthropology and Development Economics**
- **A year of politics:**
- **Bumping into China: 1972 Zhou Enlai’s pioneer foreign students**
- **Journalism** - the first edition of history  
- Financial Times goes international
- **Picking straws: a career in Asia**
- **Using Sabbaticals**
- **Victor Fung: Trade Policy Consultancy and APEC**

**I’m sure you have your own serendipitous journeys...**

## Overall aims of the course

- Explore some of the most powerful forces of serendipitous change
- Arouse sensitivity to the possibility of “unknown unknowns”
- How to anticipate developments that are often by definition impossible to anticipate:
  - Persistent vigilance
  - Lifetime learning and curiosity
  - Tripwires
  - Flexibility, agility
  - Team diversity
  - Hedging against vulnerabilities

# Course Details

1. Setting the Scene: what is serendipity and why is it important
2. The 100-Year Life
3. The Asian Century
4. Trade, Globalisation and Multilateralism
5. The Technology Revolution
6. Managing Risk
7. Demographics and Inequality
8. Global Warming and Climate
9. Communication and Trust



## Guest Speakers

Class	Guest	Background
100-Year Life	Joe Coughlin	MIT Age Lab, Boston
Asia Century	Shan Weijian	Chairman, PAG,
Technology	Rene Arnold	Huawei
Risk	James Riley	Mandarin Hotels
Diversity, etc	Emma Dodwell-Groves	Head of DEI, Sirva Worldwide (London)
Climate	Robert Gibson	HKUST Professor
Communications	Delicia Tan	CEO, Edelman



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# Harnessing the Power of Serendipity

“chance favours only the prepared mind”

