



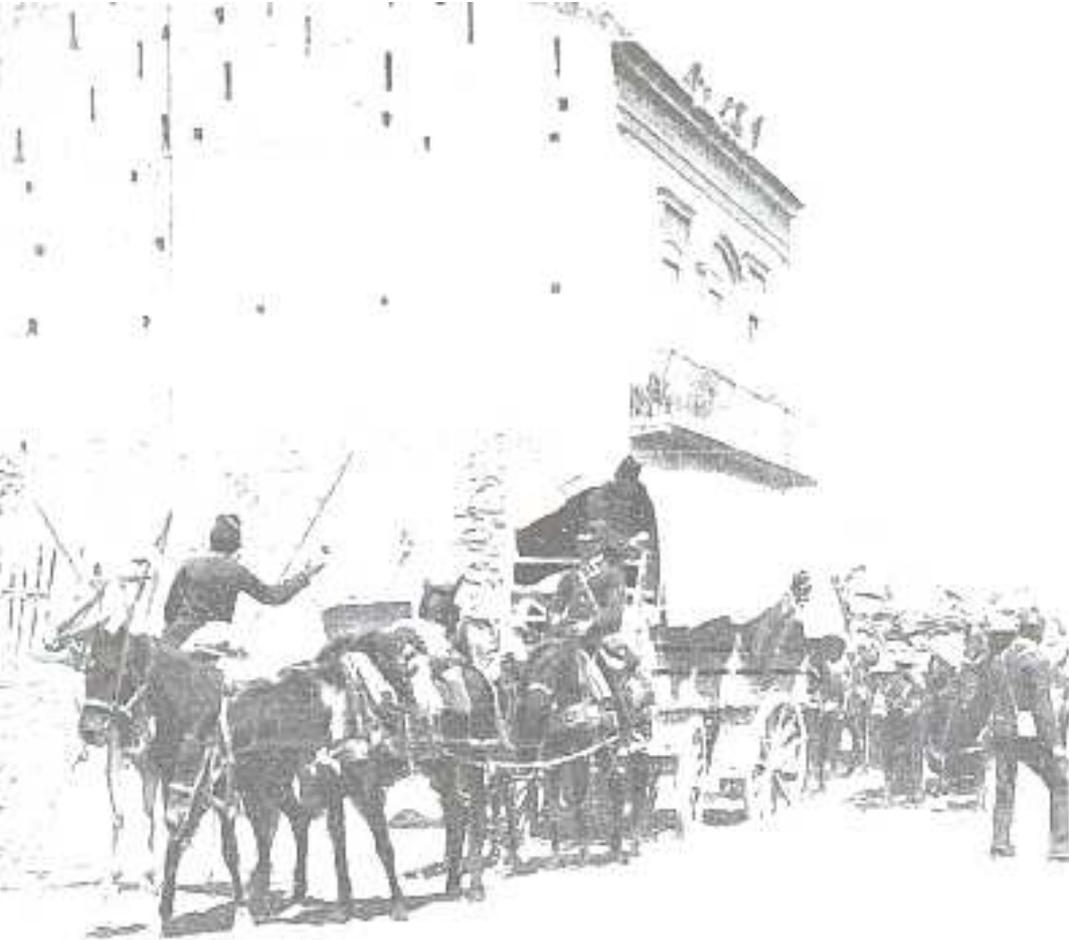
Tom Gidwitz  
Aniello Langella  
Vincenzo Marasco

# L'eruzione del Vesuvio del 1906

Vesuvioweb

2013





In occasione del centenario dell'eruzione del 1906, che vesuvioweb volle celebrare in rete con un evento dedicato nel 2006, furono raccolti molti lavori e ricerche. Abbiamo scelto tra tutte quelle editate in quell'anno le più rappresentative e le abbiamo unite in un unico lavoro.

Il dramma delle popolazioni e il grande spirito di solidarietà che prevalse sulla sciagura, viene sottolineato non solo nel testo ma anche nelle drammatiche immagini, che dimostrano come uno stato e una società in grande difficoltà economica e con problematiche politiche sullo scenario europeo, di grande rilievo, seppe dare una risposta a quelle popolazioni che si videro private della casa, della terra da lavorare e del bestiame, prima fonte di sussistenza.

# L'eruzione del Vesuvio del 1906

Di

Tom Gidwitz  
Aniello Langella  
Vincenzo Marasco

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Era il 4 Aprile del 1906 ed il Vesuvio dopo un relativo periodo di quiete si risvegliò. Stava per terminare un “ciclo mercalliano”, con tutti i crismi geologici che la vulcanologia vesuviana detta. Si suggellava nella fenomenologia vulcanica il “canto del cigno”, il passaggio cioè ad un chimismo e ad una fisicità eruttiva tipica della fine di un “percorso” geologico. Il Vesuvio entrava in quel periodo di apparente quiete che sarebbe stato sancito con l'eruzione del 1944. Mutavano le composizioni chimiche delle lave, le energie endogene delle camere subivano variazioni notevoli, cambiavano le deformazioni di crosta e tutto l'apparato vulcanico si avviava lentamente verso la grande eruzione segnalata da più parti come ultima espressione geovulcanologica.

L'eruzione del 1906 rappresentò nella storia del Vesuvio il grande evento che percorse la storia di quella terra incidendo profondi solchi tra le genti, che inermi, subirono fascino ed orrori, paure e disperazione.

Venne descritta da Henry James Johnston Lavis, da Lacroix, da Frank Perret, da Mercalli ed altri. Venne raccontata dalla Serao, ma venne celebrata da molti storici locali. Il nostro vuole essere una rivisitazione dei fatti così come ci vennero raccontati, ma nel contempo vuole rappresentare un momento di ricerca, di studio e riflessione.

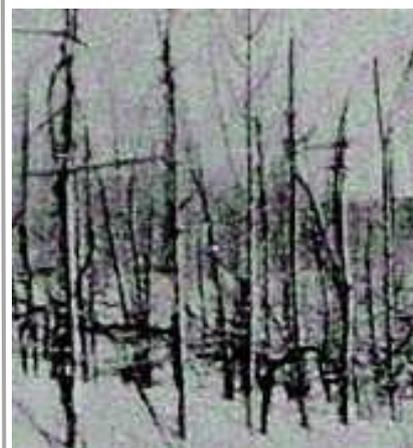
Il nostro Portale, la nostra Redazione ed i nostri Collaboratori hanno voluto riprendere in mano quei testi, quelle immagini e quelle stesse emozioni per farle rivivere in chiave di lettura nuova a tutti coloro che amano **la ricerca culturale dell'area vesuviana**.

Il 4 aprile si aprì una grande spaccatura sul fianco sud-sud-ovest del Gran Cono dove si individuò successivamente una bocca eruttiva, ad una quota di circa 800 metri slm. da cui si riversò a sud una imponente colata di lava. Contemporaneamente dal cratere l'attività eruttiva era intensa. Il 6 aprile si aprì un'altra bocca più ad est a circa 600 metri slm. Nei pressi bosco di Cognoli. Da questa nuova bocca uscì la più imponente colata di questa eruzione che si diresse verso Boscotrecase e Torre An-Nunziata. Il 7 aprile il flusso lavico diretto verso est fu fortemente alimentato e questa volta si diresse verso Terzigno, senza però causare grandi danni in quanto, attraverso naturali pendii andò a collimare con la porzione superiore della colata ancora deserta del 1834. Il cratere centrale era intanto straordinariamente attivo, eiettando enormi quantità di materiali.



*La campagna vesuviana appare come innevata. Un paesaggio che la gente conosceva, che aveva già incontrato nel corso della storia del Vesuvio. Ma quell'anno la cenere fu tanta e ovunque la campagna sembrava spettrale con gli alberi spogli.*

*Immagini da L'Illustrazione italiana. Foto Mandruzzi.*



Ceneri e fini polveri per migliaia di tonnellate vennero sospinte verso il cielo assieme a blocchi ignei grandissimi divelti dall'abrasione del flusso lungo il condotto principale. Nelle prime ore del giorno 8 aprile si osservò un fenomeno molto singolare: una quantità enorme di scorie fu lanciata obliquamente verso nord-est, descrivendo una grande curva al disopra del Somma. I prodotti di caduta depositarono sui comuni di Ottaviano e S.Giuseppe Vesuviano. Dall'Osservatorio era perfettamente visibile come questo materiale eiettato fosse incandescente fino all'altezza del Somma e quando ricadde sulle suddette località era di colore scuro e freddo. I tetti piatti delle case restarono schiacciati sotto il suo peso. Fu questa la causa del crollo del tetto della Chiesa di S.Giuseppe dove perirono 105 persone.

Dopo che cessò l'efflusso lavico, si ebbe un'altra importante fase della eruzione consistente nella emanazione di una straordinaria quantità di materiali gassosi. Infatti, con grande fragore di esplosioni (Perret lo paragonò al rumore delle cascate del Niagara) si sollevò sul cratere una colonna alta 13 chilometri. L'eruzione di gas e ceneri continuò anche il 9 e 10 aprile, ma molto meno intensa. Diminirono i lapilli, ma in loro vece cominciò a cadere una fine cenere rossastra. Il giorno 11 e 12 cadde cenere grigia e successivamente, il 13 e 14 si ebbe pioggia di ceneri quasi bianche, per cui il Vesuvio sembrava ricoperto di neve. Perret sintetizzò alcuni dati relativi a questa eruzione, confrontandoli con quelli corrispondenti relativi all'eruzione del 1872.

<i>I rilievi vulcanologici del Perret :</i>	<b>1872</b>	<b>1906</b>
<i>Durata dell'eruzione</i>	<b>4 giorni</b>	<b>18 giorni</b>
<i>Diminuzione altezza vulcano</i>	<b>15 metri</b>	<b>107 metri</b>
<i>Profondità cratere dopo eruzione</i>	<b>250metri</b>	<b>700 metri</b>
<i>Capacità del cratere</i>	<b>17x106 m<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>84x106 m<sup>3</sup></b>
<i>Altezza di proiezione del materiale</i>	<b>6Km</b>	
<b>11 Km</b>		
<i>Volume della lava(in colata emessa)</i>		<b>uguale: circa 20x106 m<sup>3</sup></b>

Terminata tutta la fenomenologia vulcanica, conclusasi la successione degli eventi, la terra vesuviana tutta fu lasciata in un panorama geologico di desolazione e distruzione. Le strade interrotte sul versante sud est, interrotte le linee elettriche, distrutte le Chiese e gli edifici, centinaia le vittime, migliaia gli ettari di bosco distrutti. Tutto il vulcano imbiancato dalla cenere. Da Somma Vesuviana a Portici, da Torre del Greco a Boscotrecase, da Ottaviano a San Giuseppe Vesuviano il paesaggio immerso in una coltre densa di scorie, ceneri e lapilli che ingombravano ogni passaggio, filtravano in ogni dimora.



*Guazzo di anonimo del 1906*

*Da L'Illustrazione Italiana del 1906, i contadini del Vesuvio in fuga dalle campagne*



La Direzione e la Redazione di Vesuvioweb vollero iniziare nell'estate del 2005, una lenta ed attenta analisi dei rilievi storici relativi all'evento in esame. Sarebbe caduto nell'aprile 2006 il centenario della grande eruzione e noi, che abbiamo voluto fare nostra la ricerca della cultura vesuviana, vedemmo in questo evento l'occasione per poter, ancora una volta sottolineare l'importanza di fornire adeguati strumenti di stimolo e studio, per uno dei più interessanti momenti della "vita geologica" del Vesuvio.

La ricerca delle fonti bibliografiche, prima e successivamente la ricognizione diretta sul territorio ci permisero in breve tempo di avere tra le mani il materiale e la documentazione corretta che ci avrebbe poi portato ad un prodotto di tutto rispetto. L'occasione di commemorare il centenario dell'eruzione del 1906 (nel 2006) ci ha permesso di editare in rete una pubblicazione che riteniamo completa, in quanto articolata su diversi ambiti:

- ricerca bibliografica
- ricerca delle fonti iconografiche
- ricerca diretta sul territorio

Questi tre momenti ci hanno permesso di redigere un testo nuovo, innovativo ed inedito. Un volto nuovo di un evento che ha ancora molto da "insegnare".

Partire quindi dai documenti storici. Questa fu la prima fase. Raccogliemmo tra le prime testimonianze quella di Stanislao Ascione. Chi è Stanislao Ascione. Fu uno dei grandi storici di Torre del Greco degli inizi del '900. Raccontò ne *"La mirabile terra vesuviana, ossia la città di Torre del Greco ed il Vesuvio attraverso i secoli"* la vita della città attraverso i documenti che pubblicò nel 1956. Proprio da questo testo ormai introvabile abbiamo voluto trarre tutta la documentazione relativa al 1906. Ascione ne delinea le fasi e ne descrive i momenti con intensità e con partecipazione. L'importanza del testo che abbiamo voluto pubblicare nel "Centenario del 1906" è da ricercare nella sua particolare elaborazione letteraria ed inoltre nel fatto che chi descrisse i fatti, visse quei momenti di persona, essendone coinvolto direttamente. Non si tratta di una rievocazione letteraria pura e semplice ma di un documento che dettaglia i fatti in maniera diretta.

Dello stesso autore abbiamo voluto pubblicare un inedito manoscritto, datato. Affascinante il fatto di possedere tra le mani questo documento che ha l'odore del passato ed il sapore della scoperta. Questo, come altri, è uno dei tantissimi inediti di questa nostra raccolta, che vuole essere presente in rete per tutti coloro che credono nella ricerca storica e culturale dell'area vesuviana.



*Dall'Illustrazione Italiana. La città di Boscoreale invasa da nubi di ceneri e dalla caduta di pomice. L'aria era irrespirabile e la gente cercava di scappare verso il mare dove li attendevano numerose imbarcazioni pronte a salpare.*

*In alto il Vesuvio in eruzione. Una delle prime immagini del vulcano dalla cui bocca si eleva una imponente nube di scorie, ceneri e lapilli.*

Attingendo ancora dalla ricerca bibliografica abbiamo poi voluto “chiedere” ad una eminenza grigia della storiografia vesuviana, l’opinione in merito. Camillo Balzano di Torre del Greco. Egli diede alle stampe nel 1907 un testo che può essere considerato una pietra angolare in tutta la grandissima messe di testi scritti per la terra vesuviana: **“Dal riposo delle Catacombe all’Eruzione del 1906”**. Già nel titolo il Balzano fa espresso riferimento all’evento eruttivo. Il Balzano offre in queste pagine uno spaccato di una realtà e di una bellezza al di fuori del consueto. Per molti lettori di Vesuvioweb questa raccolta di pagine ingiallite da 100 anni sembrerà mera rievocazione storica. Per noi rappresenta testimonianza di un inedito e di un testo dimenticato, del quale ognuno dovrebbe farne gran tesoro.

Uno dei protagonisti scrittori di quella tragica eruzione che segnò la storia dell’area vesuviana fu **Matilde Serao**. La grande scrittrice in alcuni articoli giornalistici espresse in maniera forte e quanto mai colorita le sue emozioni ed anche le sue paure. In tante circostanze la scrittrice giornalista, è stata chiamata a “testimoniare” l’evento come direttamente partecipe dei fatti. Tra le tante pagine da lei scritte abbiamo selezionato una in particolare: l’articolo del giorno 8 aprile che venne pubblicato su “Il Giorno”.

Sempre restando nel contesto della ricerca bibliografica abbiamo poi pubblicato in rete alcuni articoli tratti da un giornale a molti sconosciuto: il **“Pro Famiglia”**. Si tratta di un eccezionale documento giornalistico dal quale traspare tutto il dramma di quei giorni. L’aria è carica di tensioni in un momento politico di grandi tumulti. Il popolo vesuviano tra le concitazioni del vulcano vive con forte tensione e con drammatica forza espressiva tutti gli attimi orribili dell’eruzione.

Le pagine scritte in questo reportage dell’epoca hanno il sapore di altri tempi, vissuti sull’enfasi dell’espressione giornalistica dell’epoca. Vive assieme a queste pagine tutto il ricordo per quelle persone che subirono con patos e con amarezza immensa i fenomeni violenti e drammatici del Vesuvio. Queste pagine appartengono alla raccolta personale di **mio padre Leonardo**. A lui il ricordo per aver lasciato a me il testimone per continuare ad amare e studiare questa terra dalle ricchezze culturali immense. Questa terra dalle risorse infinite. Anche questo documento è un assoluto inedito, dimenticato nello scaffale del ricordo.

Nella commemorazione dell’eruzione del 1906 vada a mio padre la riconoscenza e l’amore per aver conservato questi documenti che potranno aiutare a conoscere meglio le nostre radici.



Guazzo. Anonimo. L'eruzione del 1906

Bambini che ripuliscono la strada dalla cenere.

Dal Giornale “Il Giorno” dell’8 aprile una vignetta umoristica, che esprime l’ironia del popolo napoletano nell’affrontare la sciagura.



— Evidentemente, il Vesuvio va in ritardo di molte settimane col calendario cristiano...  
— ?!  
— Appena esso egli ha avuto il suo giorno delle... Ceneri!



— Indietro, signore! Noi siamo qui per arrestare quelli che salgono...  
— Sarebbe proibito che arrestaste... quello che scende!

Con questa premessa abbiamo parzialmente esaurito quelli che sono stati gli sforzi volti alla ricerca delle fonti. In verità tra i tanti riferimenti bibliografici la nostra è stata solo un'azione di cernita volta a fornire al lettore documenti innovativi e stimolanti nello scenario storico che è proprio dell'evento. Non sono mancati tuttavia riferimenti ad inediti.

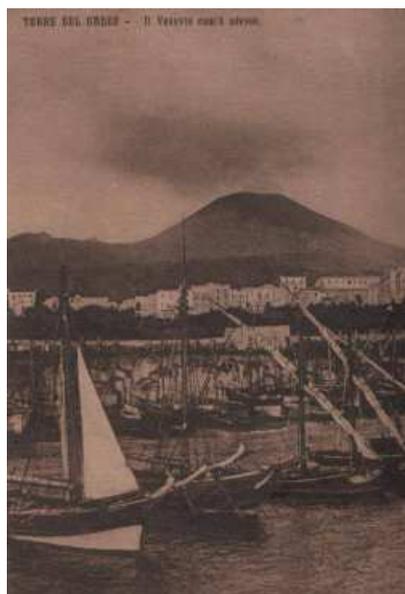
Si deve comprendere che il nostro lavoro di raccolta dati non si è limitato ad un apparente semplice contributo bibliografico, ma ha valicato il termine stesso di raccolta per entrare in un contesto di scientificità, tipico della ricerca e consono al sistema stesso di documentazione accreditata. Per questo passaggio è stato necessario attivare alcuni Collaboratori sul posto che avessero capacità, competenze ed anche imprenditoria. La scelta è caduta su **Enzo Marasco, uno dei nostri Collaboratori**, uno dei più attenti e più preparati. Reporter di un avvenimento vecchio di un secolo, Marasco ha saputo ritrovare documenti, immagini, interrogando ed intervistando i personaggi che furono indirettamente vicini a quella tragica eruzione. Il vero cuore inedito ci è fornito da tutto il materiale preziosissimo che egli ci ha fornito e che ha concesso a Vesuvioweb, il sito per il quale lavora ed al quale crede. Straordinari documenti dell'eruzione del 1906 nelle relazioni in rete. Vincenzo Marasco, Reporter e attento conoscitore dell'area vulcanica. La sua ricerca è tutta testa alla documentazione di un fenomeno vulcanico di grandissima importanza e di particolare fascino per le peculiari circostanze storiche. I lavori presentati in questa sezione sono di indubbio valore vulcanologico e geologico. Ci permettono di osservare a distanza di un secolo i fatti e le circostanze che connotarono quel triste aprile. Le immagini in gran parte inedite appartengono alla collezione privata dell'Autore. Una delle relazioni del Marasco è dedicata all'**Inno alla Vergine** che venne composto il giorno 8 aprile del 1906 e lo stesso giorno suonato e cantato in onore della Madonna. L'inno composto dal maestro Tarantino venne scritto, per invocare l'intercessione divina. Eccezionale il documento, ma ancor più straordinaria la fotografia della croce che venne preparata per lo stesso processione. Si deve sottolineare qui che una documentazione così attenta e così ricca di particolari è degna di testi di alto livello scientifico.

Un mio modesto contributo alla commemorazione dell'evento riguarda uno studio topografico dell'eruzione. In questo lavoro ho voluto dettagliare le aree del gran cono e della pedemontana dove maggiore furono i danni causati dai flussi lavici. Accompagnano il lavoro riferimenti precisi alle bocche eruttive con le relative quote altimetriche.



*Il Vesuvio durante la fase esplosiva*

*Il Vesuvio in eruzione visto dal porto di Torre del Greco*



*Luigi Palmieri e Vittorio Matteucci, in un disegno tratto dal giornale "Il Giorno" del 14 aprile, diretto da Matilde Serao. Luigi Amedeo Savoia, giunge a Napoli, e nello stesso giornale se ne da notizia*



LUCIO PALMIERI



VITTORIO MATTEUCCI



LUIGI AMEDEO DI SAVOIA  
DUCA DEGLI ABRUZZI

Conclude il nostro lavoro, la Galleria delle immagini fornite da Vincenzo Marasco e tratte da archivio personale. Si tratta di immagini in bianco e nero, sbiadite ed ingiallite dal tempo. In alcune fotografie si possono osservare dettagli del corso lavico ed anche i momenti drammatici della fase dei gas che fecero piovere sull'area tonnellate di materiale cinereo e scorie vulcaniche.

### **Il Testimone dell'evento : Tom Gidwitz**

Egli è un giornalista. Le sue ricerche appartengono al campo scientifico ed il suo sforzo di scrittore è quello di aiutare a comprendere la complessità dei fenomeni fisici della terra

Gidwitz si laurea alla Stanford University nel 1975 con una tesi sul giornalismo. Successivamente ha scritto per giornali, periodici e riviste di economia. Nel 1995 divenne direttore editoriale di Currents, una rivista quadrimestrale del Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution e si servì di questa mia carica per mettere in risalto anche il lato personale di geologo, biologo, oceanografo e fisico e rendere così meno ostica la comprensione di queste scienze. Negli ultimi tre anni ha scritto diversi articoli per la rivista Archaeology.

Gidwitz è autore del libro "La pietra nella Storia", un testo per bambini del Progetto di Paleontologia della Smithsonian Institution di Panama, che spiega come i reperti fossili stanno insegnando agli scienziati e come si sviluppano i movimenti tettonici nei pressi dell'Istmo di Panama.

Dice Gidwitz "...ma i vulcani sono stati i soggetti più spettacolari dei miei racconti. Ho visitato vulcani e accompagnato vulcanologi in Islanda, in Messico, in Grecia, negli Stati Uniti e, fortunatamente, in Italia...".

Potete leggere i miei lavori sul mio sito [www.tomgidwitz.com](http://www.tomgidwitz.com).

Un personaggio la cui preparazione e la cui dedizione alla ricerca traspare dai suoi testi e dalle sue ricerche. Sembrerà strano ma conobbi Tom Gidwitz alla stessa maniera come conobbi Enzo Marasco: nel web, in rete. Cercavo interlocutori dai quali poter apprendere di più, dai quali poter attingere conoscenze. Non sempre in rete si fanno buoni incontri. Ma devo ritenermi fortunato. Tom ha elaborato per noi articoli assolutamente importanti. Si tratta di argomenti scelti e relativi all'eruzione del 1906. Dal campo dell'ingegneria a quello vulcanologico, dalla storia alla leggenda. "The Postcard", "The Cabinet Volcano", "The Eruption", questi, alcuni dei titoli dei lavori che egli ha voluto pubblicare su [www.vesuvioweb.com](http://www.vesuvioweb.com). Testi pieni di emozioni e bellezza. Spesso la bellezza è inconsapevole di esserlo. E spesso chi scrive è inconsapevole di essere bello.



*Il Vesuvio in eruzione*

*In basso umorismo e ironia partenopea. La vignetta è tratta da "Il Giornale" del 14 aprile.*



*Piccoli profughi ricoverati presso l'Albergo dei Poveri a Napoli. Dal Mattino Illustrato*



## The postcard

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*Incontrai Gidwitz per caso. Cercavo in rete tutti i possibili link al 1906 a questa grande ed importante eruzione. Vidi subito in [www.tomgidwitz.com](http://www.tomgidwitz.com) la qualità e la preziosità del testo riferito al Vesuvio. Poi un breve scambio di mail e cos'ì oggi abbiamo la possibilità di incontrare uno dei pochi che ha studiato quell'evento da vicino.*

*Grazie. Grazie molte.*

*Aniello Langella*

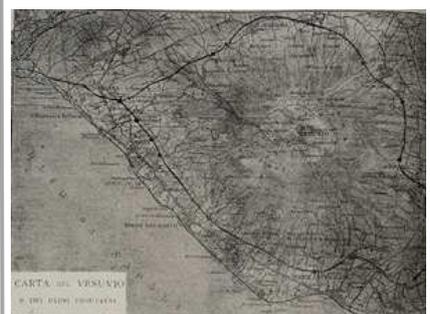
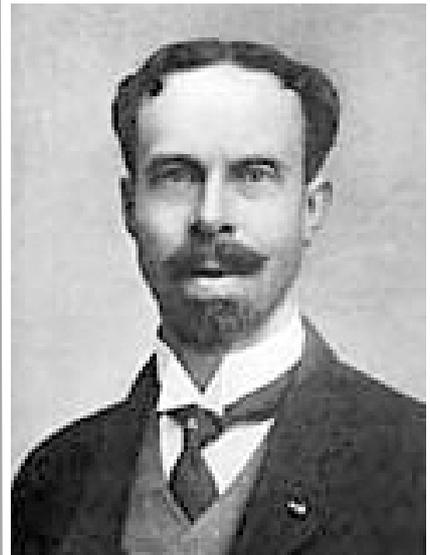
On an April day in 1906, a photographer snapped a picture at the Mount Vesuvius Volcano Observatory. The building's front steps were lost under mounds of volcanic ash; on the ground it lay two foot thick, and it coated the boots and trousers of four men standing before the camera, their eyes dark with fatigue. A mile and a half away, behind the photographer but in plain view of this fatigued quartet, a thin column of ash rose steadily from Vesuvius's crater, the tail end of a violent eruption that killed hundreds and set tens of thousands in flight. The picture survives as a postcard titled "Heroes of Duty." Three of the men are Italian, turn-of-the-century Neapolitans with handlebar moustaches arching skyward.

Brigadier Migliardi of the carabinieri, the Italian military police, stands ramrod straight in his gold-buttoned uniform. Signor Mormile, a railroad telegrapher and stationmaster, holds a sheet of paper, perhaps his latest telegram ready for dispatch. Professor Matteuci, the Observatory's chief, is a pillar of calm. With his hands behind his back, his jacket drawn open across his waist-coated belly, he is strong and undaunted but looks ready for a beer and a bed. The fourth man is smaller than the others, and although he stands in their midst he is undeniably apart. He is slender and narrow-shouldered, with a Vandyke beard, a wing collar, and a crisply knotted tie.

One hand is in his pocket, the other grasps his lapel, a stance supremely confident, cocky, even, as he looks out at us with a clear-eyed grin. This slender, stylish man is an American: Frank Alvord Perret, a gifted thirty-nine year old engineer and inventor from Brooklyn.



Two years before the eruption Perret had arrived in Naples to recover from a crushing mental breakdown, a man exhausted, depressed, and depleted by his demons. But now, his fortunes have decidedly changed. For two weeks, while Vesuvius pushed a column of smoke and fire miles into the sky, tossed gigantic boulders aloft as if they were pebbles, and swamped towns in rivers of red hot stone, Perret, his three companions, and six additional carabinieri stood watch in the Observatory, high on the volcano's slopes. Through it all, in the depth of night and at high noon when the volcano's ashy plume plunged day into darkness, the Observatory was a tiny pinpoint of light, its lanterns a spark on the knee of the colossus. The eruption was deadly, but it saved Perret. In photographs taken in the 1890s, when his innovative electric motors were in demand across the country, he presented himself in profile inaccessible, distant, and unsmiling. But in pictures after 1906, when he risked his life and emerged unscathed, he posed with the panache of a showman. In Hawaii, he and a colleague rigged an ingenious overhead cable-car to scoop a blob of fresh lava from the middle of Kilauea's 2,200 degree lava lake, and we see him carrying his prey dangling from a chain, gleaming, in its slick glassy coat, like a trussed stag skinned on the trail. Whether he's shrouded in fumes while sampling volcanic gas, confronting flowing lava with a folding camera, eavesdropping on the earth through a three-foot metal horn planted on the ground, or in a pith helmet as he nobly watches a smoking peak – he is supremely confident, as if master of the forces of the earth. Perret found salvation in volcanophilia, the human species' often irresistible urge to march toward volcanoes. Sometimes we're there for survival – we farm their fertile soil, quarry their stone, and drink the water that drains from their porous slopes. But when they erupt they hypnotize us with a suicidal spell. We turn toward them like plants summoned to the sun. When a volcano erupts – be it Etna, Pinatubo, Mount St. Helens, Popocatepetl – police, national guard, and military troops vainly struggle to block the flood of spectators who rush to the site, slip through road blocks, creep through forests in the dead of night to stand at the crater's edge and gape. We have a need to bear witness to their power and grandeur, to be awed, scared, belittled, put right. Perret was neither geologist nor chemist. He was a crackerjack observer and poetic writer, but above all he was a gifted inventor, wise in the ways of energy and matter. Volcanology provided him with a mission. While watching volcanoes for countless hours he could challenge his intellect and indulge his need for solitude, yet play a role on a global stage. He stepped into volcanology when the field was ripe for a mind like his; he brought simple new technologies to the field's young toolkit, and described wonders never seen before.



## The Engineer

Di Tom Gidwitz

He was born in 1867 and grew up surrounded by precision machinery and innovation. His grandfather, Alvord Perret, was one of the first publishers of Civil War photographs, and his father imported watches. Most of all, he was a child of the Electrical Age. From his family's Brooklyn home he watched as inventors and entrepreneurs wove New York in a cat's cradle of power lines for telephones, stock-tickers, and fire alarms. When he was sixteen the Brooklyn Bridge opened for traffic; at night its bright carbon arc lights burned a brilliant white against the sky.

But the electrical revolution had a long way to go. Batteries were huge and inefficient. Power poles stretched as tall as fifteen stories and carried hundreds of sizzling, paper-wrapped wires that smoked, rusted through, and fell sparking to the ground. In winter, snow-laden poles tipped and snapped, dragging down neighboring poles one by one in a chain reaction collapse. And despite the network of wires, human muscle moved most loads, and gas and oil lamps supplied light.

In 1886 Perret enrolled in the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute and earned honors in chemistry, physics, and engineering. But his chosen field, electrical engineering, was still in its infancy. There was no defined curriculum, and he quickly realized he could learn more in machine shops and laboratories than in any school. Before his first academic year was over, he dropped out and took a spot in the most hallowed academy of all -- Thomas Edison's lab.

In 1881 Edison had launched a bold program to stimulate sales of his new incandescent light bulbs by providing reliable electric power to homes and factories. He dug up downtown Manhattan streets, laid down a grid of power cables and hooked them to the world's largest electrical generators, housed in a three story building on Pearl Street. The distribution network used 225 of Edison's inventions and pumped power through Edison copper cable, Edison fuses, Edison sockets, and Edison meters, into Edison junction boxes and up the walls through Edison wires to Edison's glowing bulbs.

The strategy worked in New York City and elsewhere. When Perret joined the laboratory more than fifty Edison generating stations across the United States were pumping power to 400,000 incandescent bulbs.



The company headquarters was in a Fifth Avenue brownstone, but Perret worked at its creative center, Edison's own lab on the second floor at 17th Street near the East River. While 300 laborers made parts for the electrical system downstairs, Edison and his staff pursued new challenges. Perret was assigned to the team in search of a safe and reliable lightweight battery. The day's lead batteries weighed hundreds of pounds, quickly corroded, leaked sulfuric acid, short circuited, and failed. An inexpensive portable battery would have unlimited applications. Edison and his staff pursued success through trial and error, brutally long hours, sleepless nights, and exhausting work. Perret joined his colleagues as they pushed themselves to their physical limit. They launched experiments nonstop, laboring among exploding test tubes, bubbling acids, and vapor clouds that stung their eyes, burned their noses, and set them coughing.

But Perret's career had barely begun when workers at the Edison Machine Works in lower Manhattan went on strike. After two weeks Edison shut the factory and shipped its machinery and two hundred willing workers north to Schenectady where land and labor were cheap. By the end of the year Edison had moved his home and headquarters to New Jersey. Perret, however, remained behind in Brooklyn. His head was full of inventions, and he joined forces with Edison coworker John A. Barrett to start the Elektron Manufacturing Company. Perret was only 19, so young that his father had to sign the company's incorporation papers. Most other entrepreneurs named their companies after their products or themselves, but Perret and Barrett paid homage to something elemental. Elektron is Greek for amber, the translucent gemstone of petrified tree sap. When rubbed with wool it absorbs a negative charge -- loaded with static electricity, it attracts and repels objects as if by magic.

Perret was fascinated with the interaction of electricity, magnetism, and metal, and how, united, they could generate and distribute rotary motion, the key to achievement in the Industrial Age.

The era's factories relied on water wheels, wind mills, and steam engines that spun elaborate webs of shafts and belts that wound through floors, walls, and ceilings to turn more shafts and ultimately belts hooked directly to machines. But these systems were inefficient and dangerous. Friction ate up much of the power. Belts broke and flew through the air. Careless workers with loose clothing or long hair were often snatched into the spinning shafts.

Electric motors promised salvation. They were safer, quieter, and modular – if an individual motor broke down, the entire factory did not come to a halt.



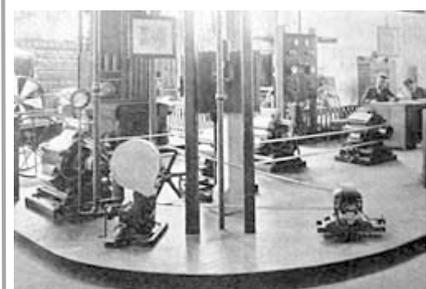
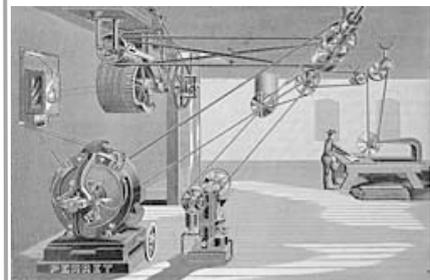
Engineers could place them anywhere current was available, and they could design production lines to suit the assembly process, not the building's skeleton of humming shafts.

Perret and Barrett set up shop in a loft in downtown Manhattan where access to Edison's electric grid had spawned a neighborhood alive with frantic invention. Nearby more than a dozen competitors were producing two pole motors – machines in which a wire-wound, electrified shaft spun in the embrace of a solitary electromagnet made of heavy, forged iron. Two-pole motors were the state of the art, although they spun at high speeds, burned out easily, and required complicated gearing systems to power the most common machines.

Perret introduced a six-pole motor that used three magnets and spun slowly enough to power saws, lathes, and printing presses without gears. He invented a lightweight magnet assembled from sheets of steel, which made his motors less expensive to manufacture, ship, and install. He patented a safety switch that protected motors from burning out, a flexible insulated electric wire, a new dependable arc lamp, an electric elevator, and an electric street car.

Salesmen in seven cities spread Elektron's gospel, and soon thousands of Perret's machines were at work across the country, lighting railway trains and steamboats, mining coal, and printing newspapers. Elektron motors pumped oil and water, blew air through pipe organs, spun sugar and cut candy. Joseph Pulitzer, owner of the New York World, installed an Elektron dynamo to light up his 170-foot yacht. An Elektron elevator hoisted passengers at Boston's Edison Building; others hauled books at the New York Bar Association and the Massachusetts State House. Elektron installed four freight elevators and seven automatic push-button dumb waiters at Delmonico's eight-story restaurant in New York City. A single motor could transform an entire shop – at a local woodworker's a ten horsepower Elektron powered two elevators, pumped water to the roof, spun a ventilation fan and the shop's buzz saw.

By November, 1889, the company had doubled in size, and in 1891, after Perret's partner Barrett left the business (he eventually made a fortune manufacturing batteries and wire insulation), Elektron's parts and machinery were loaded into twelve box cars, and the company moved to Springfield, Massachusetts. Springfield had been a sleepy Berkshire backwater until 1777, when George Washington established the Springfield Armory to store weapons and build gun carriages and casings for the Continental Army.



In 1794 the armory became the federal musket maker, and by the end of the Civil War it was producing 3,000 guns a month.

Guns are robust devices that harness gunpowder explosions to launch a projectile on a predictable path. They demand tight fittings and tough alloys, and Springfield became a center of innovation in metallurgy, precision machining, and mass production. Manufacturers flocked to Springfield to take advantage of its skilled workers and managers.

In Springfield, Elekron found a way to have both cheap real estate and labor. The company teamed up with the Springfield Christian Industrial and Technical School. The school gave Elekron a multi-story 150-foot long former gun factory; in exchange Elekron agreed to train and apprentice twenty of the school's students.

In 1893, Elekron displayed its wares at the Columbia Exposition in Chicago. On the first floor of the Electricity Building straw-hatted salesmen sat amongst the company's lamps, fans, motors, and a water pump that filled a tank until the current was miraculously shut off with a float. The exhibit's main draw was an elevator that lifted thrilled visitors to the gallery above; in one month alone it took nearly 50,000 passengers aloft.

But a new wave was breaking. That fall, a twenty-three-year-old Springfield bicycle mechanic set the nation's ambitious engineers in a whole new direction.

On September 20, Frank Duryea, a bicycle designer, built the country's first horseless carriage and took it for a ride, a 200-foot jaunt on the outskirts of town that ended when he ran into a pile of dirt. Two years later, on a snowy Thanksgiving Day, Duryea won the continent's first car race, besting five rivals in a ten-hour 54-mile round trip between Chicago and Evanston, Illinois. In 1896, as Edison engineer Henry Ford demonstrated his first gas powered "Quadricycle" in Detroit, the Duryea Motor Wagon Company produced thirteen cars, one of which, with Springfield resident Henry Wells behind the wheel, ran over a New York City bicyclist in the first car accident.

Springfield's inventors rushed to follow Duryea's lead, abandoning their businesses to build steam, kerosene, gasoline, and battery-powered cars. Perret himself left Elekron, betting that electric cars, which ranked second to steamers but outnumbered internal combustion automobiles by almost two to one, would be the vehicle of choice.

He returned to Brooklyn, established the Perret Storage Battery Company, and unveiled his first attempt -- a five-passenger car burdened with a battery that weighed more than half a ton. He refined his design and in 1898 tried again, debuting a one-person, 440-pound car with a single 175-pound battery. It could carry a 250-pound man for forty miles on a single charge and tootled along silently at 13 miles per hour. It had tiller steering and pert brass headlamps, and rode high off the ground on 28-inch spoke wheels. Perret donned a beaver hat, thick black gloves, and velvet-collared coat to show the car off to photographers.

In 1900 he patented a lightweight electric car with an articulated frame and independently tilting axles for off-road travel over bumpy terrain. It was, in essence, the country's first electric SUV.

And then Perret stopped cold. In the spring of 1902, after sixteen years of frenetic activity, he suffered a breakdown, what a friend described as a "nervous prostration caused by overwork," a condition so mentally debilitating that he dropped all and took refuge in his Brooklyn family home. He was thirty-five years old.

### Rescued

Perret was a complicated man. His academic writings are elegant, gentlemanly, and disciplined, and even his patent papers convey a soft, approachable tone. But his private correspondence is charged with feeling. Letters stretch for page after page, packed with single-spaced typescript that all but runs off the edge of the paper, by turns salutary, contrite, cajoling, suspicious, angry – heated outpourings sometimes touched with paranoia and self-pity, yet always clear in the ambitious goals he set for himself and his science.

Perret never married, never engaged, and spent most of his adult years in near-solitary labor, communing with mountains, watching smoke and lava, listening to explosions, living alone until the day he died. In his writings and letters there is never a hint of women in his life.

Instead he sought out the companionship of children. As an adult in New York until he was well into his fifties, he would unwind after work at a Brooklyn orphanage, playing games with some of the home's two hundred children until they were called to bed. Years later, when he heard that one of his ex-playmates had died, he was crippled with grief. His work with Italian children was the source of his greatest pride in World War I. And on Martinique, when the French honored him as a national hero on his seventieth birthday in 1937, the high point of the day was a party hosted, the newspapers said, by the island's kids.



Nowhere is there a hint of scandal or whisper of impropriety. Instead one sees a gifted, emotionally isolated man, trapped behind walls whose foundations, at this distance, are impossible to discern, working until he collapsed.

And his transformation was startling. One day he was a man of adamant concentration and a fount of energy; the next he was immobilized at home in Brooklyn, listening to the ticking of the parlor clock as the city passed by outside. His paralysis endured for months. Then, in May, the daily papers brought news that changed his life.

On the morning of May 7, 1902, submarine telegraph cables in the Caribbean Sea began to fail. Contact between St Vincent and Martinique and later southward from St. Lucia suddenly ceased. Late afternoon on May 9, the British steamer Roddam limped into St. Lucia. The ship's rigging, deckhouse, and hull were charred, its shrouds and upper spars were torn away, its portholes and skylights were smashed. On deck lay eighteen dead bodies, eight crewmen writhing in agony, and tons of hot blue gray ash, piled in places two feet thick.

Early on the morning of May 8, the ship had anchored in the harbor at St. Pierre, a thriving city of more than twenty-six thousand people, nestled against the foot of Mt. Pelée volcano on the north end of Martinique. Just after eight, a horrific blast of ash and fire swept down the mountain, poured through the city and thundered across the water. Ships rolled like toys and exploded in fire. The morning was suddenly pitch dark, with light only from the glowing volcano, the burning ships, the blazing city, and the incandescent red dust that had rained on deck and shot into the ship. Scorched crewmen leapt overboard, and the badly burned captain and surviving sailors fought for two hours to weigh anchor, free the steering, and escape.

Over the following days more ships arrived at surrounding islands, and the trickle of news turned into a torrent. After weeks of increasingly fretful activity, Mt. Pelée had obliterated St. Pierre. The Paris of the Caribbean, the quaint French town of pinafores and top hats, of sugar cane workers, rum distillers, Creole gentlemen and simple laborers, was gone. Within moments, twenty-seven thousand people in the city and hillside villages were dead. Hundreds more groaned in the ruins and staggered in the streets, their skin peeling, eyes blind, hair gone, clothes burned from their bodies. Only two people directly in the blast zone lived, a cobbler and a jailed prisoner, who, in later years, toured with the Barnum and Bailey Circus, billed as the eruption's lone survivor.

The cathedral, the zoo, the opera house had disappeared. The volcano had melted barrels of nails and fused spoons into twisted masses.



It baked palm trees and sent horses, carts, barrels, men, women, and babies tumbling through the streets. Its flood of blistering debris had perched a 5-ton boulder on a cliff high above the town, while another blast, two days later, swept a mountain village off the map and flattened almost all the city walls left standing.

It was a sight of unprecedented horror and pain, of Biblical forces unleashed by the Devil. And to add to the astonishment, the papers reported that a second volcano, Soufriere on St. Vincent seventy-five miles to the south, had erupted as well. There more than fifteen hundred people died in a wave of horror that left a gray carpet of ash and ruin across the tropical island's green hills.

Perret watched the world respond. President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a national commission and designated all postmasters and presidents of all national banks as collection agents. Pittsburgh's Henry Clay Frick, Chicago's Marshall Field, Frederick Pabst of Milwaukee, and Adolph Busch of St. Louis opened their pockets. Congress voted \$500,000 for relief. Newspapers and Chambers of Commerce pitched in. Denmark's Princess Waldema and Italy's King Victor Emmanuel sent donations, and governments in Berlin and Paris, the Vatican, the Jamaican legislature, and the Canadian House of Commons offered aid. The Barnum and Bailey Circus, then on tour in France, turned over the receipts from its performance in Toulouse, while the French government pondered abandoning the island.

A week after the tragedies, letters mailed from Martinique in the days before the catastrophe began to reach their destinations. The fearful voices of the dead told of weeks of earthquakes and subterranean rumblings, of reports from picnickers that the summit's crater lake had turned dark black, of horses gasping for breath and dying of suffocation, of clouds of ash continuously rolling down the mountain, and the government's statements that the islanders had nothing to fear.

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, strange livid red sunsets drew throngs to the waterfront. Laborers refused to work, children stayed home from school, and religious cultists announced the end of world. But a flotilla from the New York Yacht Club set off for St. Pierre in high spirits. William P. Eno, millionaire inventor of the stop sign and a safe driving activist, set sail in his steam yacht Aquilo, and Frank J. Gould followed three days later in his new 185 foot Helentia. "The explorations of the ruins of St. Pierre in the immediate future is predicted to offer sensations of the most thrilling character," gushed the New York Times. And Frederick Thompson, theatrical producer and owner of 'A Trip to the Moon,' a popular Coney Island ride, embarked on a three month sojourn to photograph and sketch the catastrophes for his new play 'The Destruction of Martinique.'



The \$30,000 drama, the Times said, would open in the fall with the eruption depicted “as nearly as possible in the natural colors.”

The US Navy cruiser Dixie steamed toward Martinique with 2,500 tons of relief supplies and Army troops, medics, scientists, and journalists. They found Mt. Pelée still restive. From time to time ash blasted from the peak, and the frightened crews of relief ships moored in the harbor repeatedly raised anchor and dashed out to sea. Thomas Jaggar, a twenty-two year old geologist from Boston who would become one of the century’s most prominent volcanologists, found that as he walked through the streets the thick ash beneath his feet would suddenly jet steam clouds that carried the fetid odor of bodies buried below.

The geologists were mystified. They collected specimens of every kind -- ash, stones, bits of china, melted iron, and scraps of miraculously unburned paper. They quickly ran out of sample bags and stuffed items in their socks. They climbed the summit and were sprayed with mud and ash, and looking down they saw a cinder cone in the coughing crater and a crevasse five hundred feet long and one hundred-fifty feet wide. “We were assailed with noise,” said Angelo Heilprin, President of the Philadelphia Geological Society. “Far below there was a hissing of steam like one thousand locomotives as well as violent detonations.” But they found no lava.

Heilprin feared the volcanic islands of the West Indies were about to fall into gigantic hole left behind by erupting lava and ash. Geologist Robert T. Hill maintained that volcanoes across the globe, like Iceland’s Hekla and Vesuvius, were linked together, and now the Caribbean islands’ volcanoes were proven twinned with those of Latin America.

“At the time of the explosion in St. Vincent – which was far more terrible than that of Mt. Pelée — other explosions either preceded or followed in Northern South America and Central America.” Pelée was the climax of a chain of unusually severe eruptions and earthquakes in Mexico and Guatemala. He wrongly predicted that word from the “inaccessible interior” of Central America would also bring word of numerous explosions. The scientists were not only unsure about what wiped out St. Pierre, but about what caused volcanoes in the first place.

They agreed that volcanoes were an expression of heat rising from the earth’s interior. But some theorized that sections of the earth were contracting, crushing thick subterranean strata and setting off chemical reactions that caused rock to melt and rise. Others said the earth’s contracting crust cracked and relieved pressure, causing hot, water-laden rocks within the earth to explode.



Still others, observing that volcanoes form on islands and sea coasts, asserted eruptions happened when ocean water percolated through crustal cracks, touched molten rock, flashed to steam, and blew up. Said geologist Hill, "Volcanism is still one of the most inexplicable and profound problems which defy the power of geologists to explain."

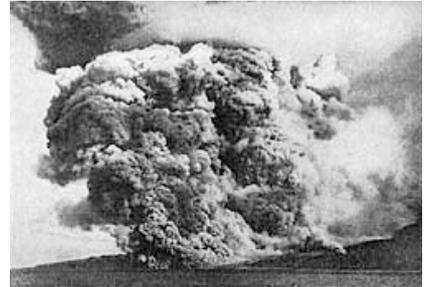
Yet, slowly, they were inching toward an answer. One evening the scientists on Martinique watched a gigantic mushroom-shaped column of smoke and cinders rise from the side of the volcano in a roiling sheet that covered the starlit sky and drifted ten miles. Lightning bolts darted across the strange cloud, which Hill blamed on explosive gases. This was "a most important observation," he said, a phenomenon entirely new in volcanic history that partly explained the catastrophe. Some sort of heavy gas had blanketed the city and helped kill the inhabitants, he said.

French government volcanologist Alfred LaCroix arrived in June, saw similar clouds, and pinpointed them as the cause of the tragedy. He called them nuées ardentes – "glowing clouds" – blistering torrents of steam, ash, pumice, and red-hot rock that were coughed from craters and charged down volcanic slopes, obliterating everything in their path.

But LaCroix did not publish his conclusions until 1904. For the time being, the catastrophe remained a scientific puzzle which jolted Perret out of his lethargy. He had no training in geology, but he understood energy, motion, and chemistry. He was gifted with extraordinary powers of observation and invention, as well as a deep-seated empathy for the innocent. He remembered when wind-blown ash from Krakatau turned Brooklyn sunsets into great red stains, and he recalled a brilliant colored chromolithograph on his father's office wall of Vesuvian fire destroying Pompeii. As he read the news accounts, he decided to become a volcanologist, a career for which he suddenly felt destined.

Perret did not know it, but he was one of a generation of young scientists who, coming of age in the wake of Krakatoa and the Martinique and St. Vincent eruptions, pledged themselves to what Thomas Jaggar, then in Martinique, later called "a missionary field."

And shortly thereafter, his fate was sealed. His doctor prescribed a complete change of scene and pace, someplace sunny warm and restful. In fact, a cure might be achieved at Naples, the doctor said, in the warm, soothing, Mediterranean air, among fragrant orange trees, pines, and palms.



For almost two thousand years Naples had offered succor to those escaping illness or crowded cities. Poets, artists, writers, naturalists, Roman emperors, and European royalty had flocked to its soft light, its warm baths, and the glory of its sapphire bay. One wonders, though, whether the doctor's prescription for rest included visits to Naples's own volcano. It stood nine miles from the city, a steaming, smoking, sometime killer. In fact, it seems likely Vesuvius may not even have crossed the doctor's mind.

### The Volcano Cabinet

In December, 1903, living on a small trickle of royalties from his electric motors, Perret took a room in Torre del Greco, a town of 30,000 on the Bay of Naples's eastern shore. It is one of more than two dozen towns and villages that ring Vesuvius like beads in a necklace, a chain of humanity that the mountain continuously destroys. Herculaneum is two and a half miles northwest of Torre del Greco; Pompeii lies six miles southeast. Beyond Herculaneum, in Portici, on a street corner in the middle of town, Perret could read an ominous carved marble plaque set on a monument of volcanic stone.

It had been erected fifty years before Pompeii's discovery, in January, 1632, on the order of the viceroy Emmanuel Fonseca y Zunica, Count of Monterey. The previous June, Vesuvius had awoken from a 500-year nap. After six months of earthquakes, the mountain indulged in two days of death, flooding towns with hot ash and killing six thousand. Set in the midst of the then still-smoldering landscape, but now almost lost in swirling traffic, the viceroy's chill warning still stands:

Descendant, descendants  
It is about You  
Today illuminates tomorrow with its light.  
Listen:  
Twenty times since the sun rose if  
History does not lie,  
Vesuvius burst into flames  
Always exterminating those who tarried.  
I warn you so that it does not catch you wavering  
This mountain's womb is heavy with pitch  
Alum, iron, sulfur, gold, silver,  
Saltpeter, water.  
Sooner or later it catches fire and, with the aid of the  
sea, it delivers.  
But before delivering  
It shakes itself and it shakes the ground  
It smokes, reddens, flares up;  
It horribly ravages the air  
It howls, roars, thunders, chases its neighbors away.



Run away while you still have time.

Here is flashing, exploding, vomiting,  
Liquid matter mixed with fire

Which flows headlong, cutting off escape for those  
who falter.

If it reaches for you, it is over: you are dead

Killed by a fire that seems to become more human as  
it becomes more

Superabundant.

If feared, it despises; if despised,

it punishes the incautious and greedy

who care more for their houses and furnishings  
than their lives.

If you are wise, listen to the voice of this stone.

Do not care about your home, do not

worry about belongings, run away without delay.

Perret paid no heed. He surrendered to Vesuvius as soon as he laid eyes upon it. As he trudged its rough hide or watched it from afar, his mind's gears meshed. He was, at last, at home.

Perret strove to decipher the autobiography that Vesuvius wrote in layers of lava, pumice, and dust. When he made his first trip to the mountaintop in January, 1904, he looked down into a crater nearly five hundred feet deep, divided in two by a low wall of stone, with a pool and fountain of lava at the bottom and intermittent explosions that lofted ash one hundred feet over his head. At night, during his first months, he mused on the halo of colored flames that danced just within the crater rim – blue green as they burned hydrogen, hydrogen sulfide, carbon monoxide or methane, and here and there flashed sodium's tell-tale yellow.

Vesuvius is a geological marvel with which Neapolitans have formed a strained but near-familial bond, as if it were some sort of rogue relation, a 4,203 feet tall cousin of graceful beauty and deadly fits. It lies to the east of Naples, where it catches the sunset light and commands one's attention as might any large, moody creature to which humans will be forever beneath notice. Bounded by the shore of the Bay of Naples to the south and west, it is cupped on its northern quarter by a sloping crescent of ruined mountain called Monte Somma. Monte Somma curves around Vesuvius like a cowl, a 3,700 foot high remnant of an older mountain that had stood upon that very spot until 79 AD, when the eruption that destroyed Pompeii blew most of it away and built the present cone. Perret liked to call Vesuvius "the cabinet volcano." It is a specimen convenient for study thanks to its relatively small size and proximity to Naples – even before the invention of the motor car one could reach the summit and return to the city in a day.

Vesuvius has a well-documented history, and its lava lies in the mid-range of volcanic viscosities: sometimes thick and pasty enough to plug its vent until the pressure mounts and an explosion blows it open, at other times thin enough to flow readily for years. In Perret's day it provided a full repertoire of volcanic behaviors – flaming gas, steaming vapors, explosions, lava jets, ash clouds – in an endlessly varied show perfect for a budding volcanologist.

Vesuvius is part of the most famous and well studied volcanic landscape in the world, a geologic war zone where the earth slowly bubbles like a pot of boiling stone. The region has been bursting with volcanic activity for at least two million years. It is crisscrossed by a diagonal mesh of countless earthquake faults, lines of weakness where lava punches its way to the surface.

At the time of the dinosaurs the region was the floor of an ancient sea whose sunken shells and fish bones now form a thick subterranean limestone layer. When Vesuvius erupts the rising gas and magma ripping through this bedrock strips free hunks of limestone and tosses fossil shells into the air with the volcano's red hot ash.

West of Vesuvius, on the Bay's arching northern shore, is the Campi Flegrei, the "Phlegrean Fields," named from a Greek word meaning "to blaze." The ancient Romans said this crater-pocked zone was where giants, dislodged from the clouds by bolts of lightning, fell to ground; buried beneath the surface, they bled hot, sulfurous waters. The Solfatera, a shallow six-hundred yard wide crater that seethes with bubbling gray pools of boiling water, is but one of dozens of volcanic vents that the Romans used for spas and baths. All around are temples and villas, including that of Nero himself. In another crater by the shore lies Lake Averno, once said to be the entrance of Hell and so poisonous that birds flying through its vapors fell dead from the sky. Averno was wide enough to serve as a harbor for the Roman navy after the Roman general Agrippa carved a canal through the crater walls to the Mediterranean in 37 BC.

Magma surges and sinks beneath the Campi Flegrei, and the surface swells and falls in response. Near the shore in Pozzuoli, at the Bay's western end, sit three marble columns on a broad flat platform. Known as the Temple of Serapis, the original twelve-column structure was eighteen feet above the sea when built in about 100 AD. In the last two thousand years these columns have sunk as deep as fifteen feet and returned to their original height. The surviving pillars are now ringed with three broad bands that can only have formed underwater, including a seven-foot wide strip of holes bored by hungry seaworms.



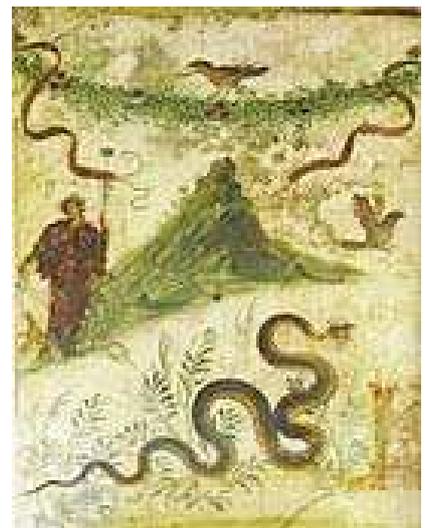
Three miles east, during two September days in 1538, a stretch of seashore suddenly bulged twelve feet in the air. As the waters retreated, residents scooped up flopping fish stranded on the sand, and royal decrees promptly gave the territory to court favorites. But two days later the little hill's top blew open, and Monte Nuovo, a new volcano, was born. For five days it smoked and vomited hot rock, growing large enough to consume a village, a castle, and the local spa. It was a mountain three miles around when it breathed its last. Monte-Nuovo-page.

Every few thousand years there are eruptions so large here that the magma reservoir deep beneath the earth empties and collapses to form a volcanic landform called a caldera, a relatively flat bottomed sunken pit with sides that can be straight as a bucket's. Two calderas cradle the Campi Flegrei. The largest is more than eight miles across and formed in the midst of the last Ice Age, when the earth split and so much magma showered out -- nineteen cubic miles -- that a patch of ground four times the size of Manhattan collapsed in a depression almost half a mile deep. Another, smaller eruption twenty thousand years later draped the landscape with a distinct yellow stone called Neapolitan Yellow Tuff. You can see it in quarries, spread through the ground like a humongous layer of icing in a gigantic cake. It covers 386 square miles, in places hundreds of feet thick. The locals have cut out countless tons of it to wall the buildings that glow so warmly in the Mediterranean sun.



### Eyewitnesses

Vesuvius makes lots of stone, but it can sleep for centuries. Hannibal saw Vesuvius erupt in 215 BC, but it was snoozing in 73 BC when Spartacus and his band of rebellious slaves hid on its summit. A century later the Greek historian Strabo realized that Vesuvius was a volcano like Etna because their rocks were much alike, but that information was largely forgotten until August 24, 79 AD, when Vesuvius reawoke. On that hot, languorous August morning sixteen-year old Pliny the Younger looked up from his studies to see an odd pine-tree-shaped smoke cloud rising from the mountaintop. Years later, in two letters to the historian Tacitus, he described the event in the earliest eye witness report of a volcanic eruption. Volcanologists have honored Pliny by ascribing the name "Plinian" to the kind of violent eruption and the type of tall, coherent, mushroom-shaped plume that he saw that day.

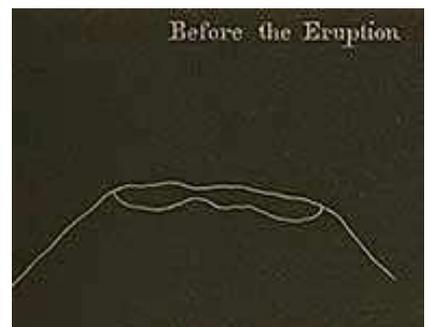


The Death of Pliny Pliny was residing at Misenum, a point of land across the Bay from the volcano, at the villa of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, a prolific scholar and commander of the fleet of the Bay of Naples.

As the eruption cloud shot into the sky it showered ash on the towns across the water, and Pliny the Elder made plans to launch a boat and investigate. Just as he was leaving, a letter requesting rescue came from a woman trapped in her villa at Stabiae at the foot of the mountain. Changing plans, Pliny the Elder set sail and headed straight for the mountain. Pliny the Younger and his mother stayed behind and watched devastating ash clouds roll down the mountain and spread across the Bay, and he describes their flight from the villa, the earthquakes, the lava, the lightning, and the distinctive, depthless darkness that falls when a volcanic cloud obliterates the sun. Pliny the Elder perished on his rescue, and countless more died in Pompeii, Herculaneum, and other communities nearby.

Sir William Hamilton In the following centuries, Vesuvius experienced long stretches of both quiet and violence. In 1764 it began nearly three continuous decades of activity that became one of the must-see spectacles in Europe. On the scene through its duration was one of history's most noted volcanophiliacs, William Hamilton, British Ambassador to the Kingdom of Naples. Tall, thin, with deep-set eyes, and a hook nose, Hamilton was a suave diplomat with enormous sway over Neapolitan society and court and is considered the first modern volcanologist. He made hundreds of trips to the volcano and seventy ascents to observe the flowing lava. Many of his excursions became social events, as gentlemen with tri-cornered hats and waistcoats and ladies in long gowns, assisted through the rocks by guides in rough cloth caps and capes, followed him up the slopes to the lava. Hamilton had been at his post barely a year when, in September, 1765, he watched Vesuvius awaken. He rushed to the mountain to spend the night at the crater's edge, and he returned over the following months to pass the night at the summit, watch the lava and record his observations. He compiled histories of past eruptions, collected mineral specimens and from his Villa Angelica in Portici drew the changes that day by day altered the summit's silhouette.

On the night of October, 29, 1767, lava descended upon the Royal Palace, and King Ferdinand I took flight. The sixteen-year old king, a spoiled, thick-headed, boor who had mounted the throne at the age of eight and had been governing in his own right for mere months, ordered 20,000 of his subjects to march on the volcano and brandish the remains of San Gennaro, the city's patron saint. San Gennaro, bishop of Benevento in 305 A.D., had refused the Roman Emperor's orders to renounce his faith; when thrown before hungry lions and tossed into a flaming furnace, he emerged unscathed. In 472 AD, prayers before his tomb stopped an eruption, and now, face to face with his relics, the volcano quieted again.



Hamilton sent countless rock samples back to England for analysis, and he submitted his observations to the Royal Society in London in six lengthy letters. In 1776 he published *Campi Phlegraei: Observations on the Volcanos of the Two Sicilies*, which featured magnificent hand colored plates of the eruptions, volcanic landscapes, and minerals. Hamilton's writings were a scientific landmark for their careful descriptions and for his assertion that volcanoes were positive agents of constructive change.

Hamilton's tenure and Vesuvius's spectacular displays coincided with the flowering of the Grand Tour – the circuit of Europe undertaken by wealthy travelers which came into fashion at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Grand Tour offered them the chance to acquire polish and culture, to collect art, absorb ideas, and indulge their appetites. It owed much to the spirit of the Enlightenment - - to the era's burgeoning interest in the natural world and its reassessment of man's place on earth and relation to God.

For many, Naples was the Grand Tour's climax. Its warm air, soft light, and savory foods were the antithesis of the climate and fare of Northern Europe. It was a boisterous, exciting city of devout and superstitious inhabitants, of cutthroat thieves and flamboyant princes, where the perfume of sweet flowers and the gaiety of its people, with their brightly colored scarves, scarlet vests, and skirts, contrasted with the omnipresent threat of cholera and malaria, the stench of volcanic sulfur, and the nearness of death.

"The Terrible beside the Beautiful, the Beautiful beside the Terrible, cancel one another out and produce a feeling of indifference," Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said of Naples. "The Neapolitan would certainly be a different creature if he did not feel himself wedged between God and the Devil."

Goethe reveled in Naples. He spent two months there, and climbed Vesuvius – "a peak of hell which towers up in the middle of paradise" – three times. Goethe mailed home letters scorched black in Vesuvius's heat, and he described traveling toward the mountain after an ash fall, past the confines of the thriving city into the outer suburbs and gardens where a dull gray ash coated everything in sight, as if one were leaving the zone of life for a parallel realm of the dead.

And the dead were certainly one of Naples's prime attractions. For more than twenty years laborers had been unearthing the entombed cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii, and the fantastically preserved remains of the doomed towns sparked a sensation.

The frescoed walls, the pots and vases, the statues, and colonnaded buildings ignited an international fervor for classical styles.



When Marie Antoinette adopted painted Pompeian motifs for the palace at Fontainebleu, the European aristocracy rushed to follow suit.

Hamilton promoted the excavations and acquired thousands of vases, terra cottas, bronzes, ivories, gems, and marble statues. The constant stream of artists and scholars who flocked to his salons at his Villa Angelica in Portici marveled at his collections, and he treated favored guests to a glimpse of what Goethe described as “his secret treasure vault, which was crammed with works of art and junk, all in the greatest confusion. Oddments from every period, busts, torso, vases, bronzes, decorative implements of all kinds made of Sicilian agate, carvings, paintings and chance bargains of every sort, lay about all higgledy-piggledy.” Goethe snuck a peek into one long case and found two magnificent candelbras he was certain had been filched from the Pompeii excavations. “Perhaps these and other such lucky acquisitions are the reason why Sir William shows his hidden treasures only to his most intimate friends.”

Lucky guests would also see a show by Emma Hart, Hamilton’s wife. A stunning beauty, she had first come to public attention as a model for artist George Romney, who, infatuated, painted her portrait more than 100 times. Hamilton fell for her as well, and brought her to Naples in 1786 after he acquired her from his nephew in return for paying off his debts. They married five years later, when Hamilton was 61 and she 26. At Portici she was famous for her ‘Attitudes’: inside a tall black box, surrounded by a golden picture frame, she struck a series of poses in quick succession, miming figures found in Pompeian murals, ancient myths, or modern celebrities. Emma later won the heart of British naval hero Admiral Horatio Nelson, but Hamilton’s allegiance never wavered. When Hamilton was recalled in 1800, the trio toured the continent, then took up residence together in England. Emma and the admiral were at Hamilton’s bedside when he died in 1803.

But Naples’s true star remained Vesuvius. When it erupted, tourists hurried from Rome and Venice. Eager for souvenirs, they gave birth to an art market that, at height, employed more than 300 painters, engravers, draftsmen and lithographers. The most influential was Frenchman Jacques-Pierre Volaire, who arrived in Naples in 1769 and for fifteen years captured the mountain’s magnificence on panoramic canvases with elements that have become clichés for paintings of volcanoes around the globe – the red peak and the orange lava rivers against the dark night, awestruck witnesses watching the lava, while a cool full moon shines high above.

Goethe, too, was under the volcano’s spell. As he paid his farewells, while departing Naples for the final time, word came that a lava stream was descending the mountain.



With his thoughts “running on lava all the time,” he hurried to the seafront “to watch the lights and their trembling reflections in the agitated sea, the full moon in all its glory, the flying sparks of the volcano, and above all, the lava, which had not been there two nights ago, moving on its fiery, relentless way.” He sat at the water’s edge, absorbed in the spectacle, ignoring the crowds around him who engaged in the irresistible urge of all volcano watchers, spouting “explanations, stories, comparisons and senseless arguments about the direction the lava would take.”

Pierre Jacques Volaire

The next day, his departure at hand, he was morose. “All the time I looked longingly at the cloud of smoke as it slowly moved toward the sea, indicating hour by hour the advance of the lava.” That evening he was trapped in torturous conversation with a duchess in her villa, until she opened a shutter to reveal Vesuvius. “From the summit to the sea ran a streak of molten lava and glowing vapor, but everywhere else sea, earth, rock, and vegetation lay peaceful in the enchanting stillness of a fine evening, while the full moon rose from behind the mountain ridge. It was an overwhelming sight.”

### The Visitors

Vesuvius was active through much of the nineteenth century, and although its repose periods were longer, its violence less continuous, it was nonetheless deadly: in 1872 an avalanche of hot rock killed twenty five tourists. But there were plenty more to replace them as leisure travel became increasingly accessible to the growing middle class. In Britain, Cook’s Tours began selling package trips to Italy, promising Vesuvius climbs.

Over the centuries countless volcanophiles had cut a well-worn path to the mountaintop, yet the journey was far from pleasant. Porters, beggars, vendors, guides-for-hire and wandering musicians besieged the tourists on their way up, offering to tote them to the top in litters, pull them uphill with straps, or hoist them to the summit in sedan chairs.

Mark Twain visited in 1868. He left his hotel by mule in the predawn darkness, winding through vineyards, past gardens and cottages and was halfway up the mountain by sunrise. He described his trip in *Innocents Abroad*:



“It was a rough, narrow trail, and led over an old lava flow -- a black ocean which was tumbled into a thousand fantastic shapes -- a wild chaos of ruin, desolation, and barrenness – a wilderness of billowy upheavals, of furious whirlpools, of miniature mountains rent asunder – of gnarled and knotted, wrinkled and twisted masses of blackness that mimicked branching roots, great vines, trunks of trees, all interlaced and mingled together: and all these weird shapes, all this turbulent panorama, all this stormy, far-stretching waste of blackness, with its thrilling suggestiveness of life, of action, of boiling, surging, furious motion, was petrified! – all stricken dead and cold in the instant of its maddest rioting! – fettered, paralyzed, and left to glower at heaven in impotent rage for evermore!”



At twenty to six in the morning Twain and his party were climbing a slope of loose stones toward the crater, stepping forward and sliding back on a surface that seemed steep as a wall. An hour and fifteen minutes later they stood at the summit, contemplating the crater below them. It was then two hundred feet deep, four to five hundred feet wide, and in the center, rising from the crater floor like an island surrounded by a ditch, was a beautiful hundred foot high jumble of frozen lava. “The sulphur coating of that island was gaudy in the extreme – all mingled together in the richest confusion were red, blue, brown, black, yellow, white – I do not know that there was a color, or shade of a color, or combination of colors, unrepresented -- and when the sun burst through the morning mists and fired this tinted magnificence, it topped imperial Vesuvius like a jeweled crown!”

In 1878, Hungarian engineer Ernesto Obleicht proposed a railway to carry tourists the last half mile from the end of the government road, to the top. It opened in 1880, a 900-yard long funicular whose two fifteen-passenger cable cars, the “Etna” and “Vesuvio” climbed 1,300 feet, carrying up to 300 tourists a day on the twelve minute trip to the upper station near the summit. Although worried locals feared it might goad the sensitive mountain into erupting, it opened to much fanfare and inspired songwriters Luigi Denza and Peppino Turco to dash off, “Funicular, Funiculi” the famous, jaunty tune that swept the world and became a standard.



But the venture was on shaky financial ground: coal for the steam engine that powered the system had to be hauled up by horseback; passengers were scarce in bad weather and throughout the winter, and an annual concession fee and tax on every passenger, paid to win agreement for the project from the local township of Resina and the volcano guides, sucked away the profits. After Obleicht sold out to a French firm at a handsome markup, the venture, swamped in debt, went bust.

The collapse brought Cook's Tours face to face with disaster. The company was under contract for scads of volcano tours. John Mason Cook, the son of the company's founder, propped up the funicular company with his own funds, then, in 1887, bought the railway outright. To keep it alive he refused to pay concession fees to Resina or taxes to the guides. The guides promptly rioted. They set the lower station afire, cut the funicular's cables, and pushed a cable car a half a mile uphill and dumped it into the crater. When Cook rebuilt, the guides cut the cable again. Cook then shut the whole operation down; the guides yielded and agreed to a fixed fee's on Cook's terms. Peace was restored, and the travelers returned.

Cook now had a near-monopoly over access to the Vesuvian summit. Anyone was perfectly free to ride by carriage for an hour and a half up the government road from Herculaneum, but the last 1.75 mile stretch to the lower funicular station was closed to all but those who had bought one of Cook's packages, which included round-trip carriage rides to the mountain, and escorts to the crater rim for a three-hour stay. Those dreading the steep fifteen minute climb to the crater could pay more for two porters to carry them, and an extra fee secured a guided hike to flowing lava, where visitors could press coins into the lava to make souvenirs, and use red hot rocks to cook eggs and ignite cigars.

### The Observatory

By the time Perret arrived in 1904, Cook had built a new railway which could whisk 1,800 passengers a day to the funicular in less than an hour. And, if they wished, a lucky few could stay overnight at the Eremo Hotel, Cook's new twenty-five room guest house. Perret stayed there frequently as the volcano grew more fretful, a steady figure in the visiting stream, staring, watching, thinking, transfixed. He devised an ingenious pocket-sized diagram that allowed him -- in a matter of seconds -- to make a detailed record of the volcano's symptoms in a form that could be interpreted at a glance. He called it the Perret System, and described each card as "a symposium of volcanic phenomena." As the eruption gained strength he could flip through the cards and watch the lines he traced stretch outward like a starburst, then blossom like a flower. His own body stood in for the scientific instruments he was too poor to buy. He sniffed for sulfur's tang and detected carbon dioxide by the torpor it induced in his brain. He measured the power and direction of earthquakes by how they rumbled through his body. Nowadays, when volcanologists analyze volcanoes, they call on satellites, laboratories, oceans of data and teams of collaborators. Perret was a one man band.



Perret saw that the volcano worked in a regular pattern. Intense bursts preceded days of calm that were interrupted by yet more powerful blasts. He realized Vesuvius was a container for a column of intensely hot, molten rock, thousands of feet tall, pushing up from deep within the earth. As the magma accumulated inside the volcano, the column grew heavier and heavier, weighing down more liquid rock struggling to rise. Pressure would build until this liquid load was somehow lightened – until the cone cracked and some lava drained out or an earthquake jiggled the heavy, stagnant column. Then suddenly its pent up gases would boil out of solution, the water trapped in the red hot rock would flash to steam, and this deadly froth would burst out of the crater like a jet of champagne from a bottle. A calm would follow each “paroxysmal gaseous outburst,” as Perret called them, until more magma rose and the cycle repeated. Perret’s eye was exceptionally acute, and he brought a new instrument to the field – the mass market folding Kodak 3A camera. Small enough to fit in his pocket, loaded with film readily available in Naples where he now lived, he carried it with him constantly and began the world’s first long term, consistent photographic record of a volcano. The pictures – processed in his apartment with homemade developer, stored in his files or sold to tourists, magazines, and scientific journals to pay his bills – not only form a superb pictorial diary of the angry mountain, but are infused with an unflinching sense of design. For one sequence he returned for months to the same spot on Monte Somma, capturing Vesuvius’s progression from a peaceful cone to a battered hulk, framing the view not only to take in the mountain, but also, in the foreground, an old rough wall of weathered lava and a single stone sentinel that lends the pictures balance, scale, and grace. Inevitably, Perret was drawn to the Vesuvius Observatory, two thousand feet up the volcano’s western side. The Observatory was the inspiration of Ferdinand II (1810-1859), Bourbon King of the Two Sicilies, who was intent on turning Naples, his kingdom’s capital, into a center of science and technology that would benefit all mankind. He lavished money on museums, an astronomical observatory, and the city university. In 1841 the king created an observatory to study Vesuvius’s influence on the earth’s magnetic field and weather. Three-quarters up the cone, on a crest that split the intermittent lava flows like a rock in a river, was the Colle del Salvatore (Savior’s Hill), a holy spot long the site of a hermitage and church. There, a mere mile and a half from the crater, King Ferdinand built a scientific citadel strong enough to withstand Vesuvian bombardments. Its stately front steps and doric columns lent it pomp; Palladian windows and an observation tower gave it unmatched views of the peak, and its brick walls, hewn from the Neapolitan yellow tuff, were thick enough to withstand showers of Vesuvian boulders.



Observatory construction was complete in 1848, but the observatory's research immediately ran into trouble: Ferdinand himself.

Considered magnanimous when he assumed the throne in 1830, by 1848 Ferdinand was battling to preserve his power. He fought to evict Austrian troops from the Piedmont, quashed a rebellion that swept across Sicily, reneged on the liberal constitution he had granted his subjects, and smashed a rebellion in Naples. By the end of the summer Ferdinand was triumphant. Now dubbed "King Bomb" after the way his troops flattened Sicilian cities, Ferdinand sacked the Observatory's first director, Macedonio Melloni, for his antimonarchical views.

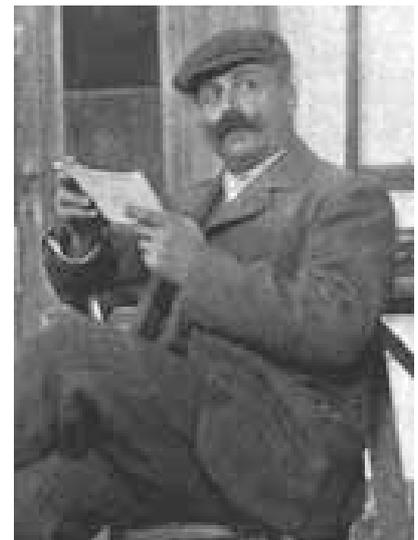
The Observatory lay dormant until 1852 when physicist Luigi Palmieri was appointed chief. His specialty was atmospheric energy – infrared radiation, lightning, the earth's magnetic field. At Vesuvius he noticed that small earthquakes almost always preceded eruptions, and he redirected the Observatory's priorities to the study of Vesuvius itself. By 1856 he had invented and installed the world's first seismograph. It was an ingenious and intricate four-foot tall mechanism that used mercury – set dancing by the trembling earth – to engage electronic switches to measure the up, down, and sideways motions of quakes. It also jiggled a weight that bounced a spring that stopped a clock and pushed a pencil against an unrolling paper spool. The length of the resulting line measured the shakings' duration; the stopped clock recorded its time.

Palmieri manned the observatory during eruptions in 1858, 1861, and 1868. In 1872, during an eruption in which an explosive lava flow killed two dozen tourists, Vesuvius isolated Palmieri on the slopes, broke all the building's windows, and repeatedly set it on fire. When the mountain calmed, Palmieri installed a telegraph line to communicate with the city authorities below.

In 1904, at Perret's first visit, the director was geologist Raffaele Vittorio Matteucci, a burly, affable man with a ruddy face, a bristling silver gray moustache, and an operatic passion for Vesuvius.

He had taken office in 1898 as the Observatory's fourth chief. "I love my mountain," he told *Cosmopolitan Magazine* in 1905. "I could not leave her. She and I dwell together in a solitude mysterious and terrible. The luster of her awful brow lights up the night far out at sea; her moods are many and various – a mistress most imperious whose wrath is more terrible than an army with banners."

Matteucci was fearless. In 1902 he camped on the crater's edge for three days as lava boiled 260 feet below and enormous blocks of stone and ash clouds lofted into the air. At one point, when a huge, hot boulder shot high and landed yards away, Matteucci did not run.



Instead he had calmly taken out his stopwatch and counted its 17 seconds of flight. Afterwards, weighing the stone and deducing its speed at 300 feet per second, he calculated his beloved had launched the stone with a 608,000 horsepower cough – nearly three times the power of a Boeing 747.

“I could not leave her. I am wedded to her forever; my few friends say that her breath will scorch and wither my poor life one of these days; that she will bury my house in streams of liquid metal or raze it to its very foundations. Already she has hurt me, has injured me sorely, yet I forgive her, I wait upon her, I am hers always.”

In 1900 Matteucci was watching the action from the crater’s edge when a premonition sent him running. As he tried to dash away, he became bogged down in deep ash and had gone no more than 60 feet when scalding stones began showering down. As he shielded himself, a rock smashed his camera; bending to pick up the shattered lens he slipped into the scalding ash. In agony, he gathered up the camera “for it contained so many very valuable films” and crawled down the mountainside. Only later did he realized he had been beaten, bruised, and burned. He recuperated for months in bed.

Matteucci lived a hermitic life at the observatory, rising at dawn to breakfast on a crust of bread and cheese. “How can I, when my beloved volcano is in eruption, and I should be counting the number of explosions per minute, occupy my mind with thoughts of mere food?”

For Perret, such a life was heaven. And the Observatory itself seemed to dwell amongst both the mystical and the mechanical at once. On the ceiling were paintings of Minerva crowning Prometheus, Aeolus commanding the winds, Vulcan inspecting armor from the forge, a volcanic plume, a waterspout, and telescopes, lenses, and chemical flasks born aloft by cherubs. In the octagonal library, beneath its three-story dome, hallowed names of Italian science - Galileo, Volta, Dell Porta, Galvani – joined Archimedes on the walls. Paces away was the Colle del Salvatore ancient chapel. Two hunks of glassy lava flanked its door, molded when molten to record the ascent of Saint Pius X in December, 1899, and memorial plaques for Vesuvius’s victims.

The observatory had collections of countless vials of volcanic ash and shelves of contorted volcanic rocks, and carefully crafted, polished brass instruments that could measure the earth’s movements and the mountain’s changing shape, track magnetism and aerial electricity. But Perret was surprised to learn from Matteucci that the Italian government gave the observatory a pittance in support. When Perret worked at Edison’s laboratory, money was unlimited, and here, in the volcano’s shadow, the stakes of ignorance were far, far, higher.



Perret had much to learn from the professor, and they watched together as the explosions that thundered across the Bay of Naples changed the two-chambered crater that he had seen the year before into a wide open round funnel, thirty stories deep. At the bottom a vent assiduously coughed out lava and ash, building a conelet on the crater floor. Sometimes it would produce what volcanologists call strombolian explosions (named for the common activity at the Italian volcanic island Stromboli) – brightly luminous clots or jets of lava and salmon-colored steam. At other times it would yield vulcanian blasts (named for the Vulcano, the volcanic island that the Roman’s thought was home to the god Vulcan) – dark ash-filled clouds, formed when portions of the cone would collapse into the vent to be expelled in blasts that showered powder over Naples. Slowly the conelet grew, climbing in height, widening, filling the crater funnel. It puffed giant whirling smoke rings, and in the pall of summit snowstorms glowed red and crackled with blue-white lightning. In mid-April the cone’s tip poked above the crater’s lip for the first time, and by May had almost completely filled the crater and sat atop the volcano like a great restrictive nozzle that nearly pinched the crater shut. The cone’s tip was now 4,380 feet high, and it allowed the column of magma within Vesuvius to build to an unprecedented size, a gigantic slug of melted rock weighing down the increasing load of gas and vapors building up from below. “With such conditions as these,” Perret wrote later, “in a volcano of this type, a great eruption surely impended.”

For the next six months the lava column rose and fell within Vesuvius like a blood pressure cuff’s bobbing mercury. It would spill from the summit or burst from vents lower down the mountain, leaving a filigree of orange lace over the cone at night, or steaming white vapors rising from the fresh black rock during the day. This lava was in a state he had never seen before: superheated, charged with gas, spattering and flowing swiftly, hissing with acidic sulfur dioxide gas. And after each pressure release, the mountain would fill up again with lava hot enough to melt the mountain itself. In early June, 1905, Perret was standing with a group of students on the crater rim when the rock beneath them began to burn their feet. No sooner had they scampered away when the six-foot patch of ground where they had stood glowed bright, bulged, then liquefied into a small stream of lava that flowed down slope. Perret’s dedication, intuition, and inventiveness impressed Matteucci, and at the end of 1905 he offered Perret the unpaid position of “Honorary Assistant to the Royal Observatory.”

“Realizing that important events were impending,” Perret recalled later, he eagerly accepted.



## The eruption. Phase 1

Vesuvius became more active through the spring of 1906, and the volcanologists waited in suspense for the inevitable denouement. In February, flowing lava cut the Vesuvian Railway in three places, ponded in hot lakes and shot skyward in dazzling jets. Vesuvius fountained again in late March, this time launching lava almost horizontally. Perret, standing on the crater rim during the next momentary lull, found that the lava's surface stood nearly level with the crater rim.

Perret was back at the Eremo on March twenty-fifth. That night as he lay in bed, he thought he heard a buzzing sound rising from beneath the floor. When he stood up, the sound ceased. When he lay down, it returned. It was continuous but so faint it was almost beyond hearing, and he wondered if he had imagined it. He borrowed a trick from Thomas Edison, which the deafened master had used when he auditioned piano players for his first recordings and to test early phonographs: He sat up and pressed his upper teeth against the iron bedstead. The vibrations buzzed in his skull. There was no doubt – the sound was real.

Perret was unsure what to make of it. The next morning he mentioned the incident to Matteucci, who laughed and said he was probably hearing the inn's cook grinding the breakfast coffee. But something more was afoot. Nine days later, on April 4, the view of Vesuvius from his apartment brought Perret up short. "From Naples the usual white vapor was seen issuing from the crater with a subtly but decidedly unusual aspect impossible to describe," he later wrote. "As the skilled physician sees in the patient a significant change which to other eyes is not revealed, so the volcanologist, observing the crater on this day, saw there the signature of a new power. There could be no further doubt that the long pre-eruptive period had reached its culmination."

He watched it through his telescope, scanning from time to time down to the Observatory. He was certain those inside saw what he saw, that a new page had turned in the volcano's story. No doubt the seismometers were busy, their arms bobbing, their mercury shaking, their needles scratching a new chapter on the powdered glass. Certainly, he wrote, "interesting developments were at hand."

Through the morning the cloud darkened as the uprushing gases gained strength and tore chunks of rock from the volcano's upper throat and cone. The steamy white cloud was thicker and more cohesive than he had ever seen before, standing like a dense tower against the wind.



By noon the plume grew denser still, and that afternoon the mountain's side cracked anew, spilling a small amount of lava to the southeast, smothering the zigzag path that led tourists up from Pompeii. By evening the wind had spun the plume into a threatening black scythe that hung over the city, with tendrils snaking toward the sea. A rain of coarse sand began to fall. The Neapolitans went uneasily about their business, wheezing, choking, sneezing in the thickening haze.

"Caps with long visors were a positive necessity," wrote New York Times correspondent Arthur Stanley Riggs, "and many peaceful, inoffensive citizens who had never ridden in automobiles appeared as begoggled as the veriest scorcher. Locomotive engineers, motormen, cab drivers, porters, and newsboys made paper visors for their caps, and street gamins offered halves of newspapers folded and creased for the same purpose."

Perret watched the volcano all that night as it fractured and bled more lava. The next morning the ash swirled from Vesuvius in a great smear across the sky; it sifted down over the royal palace, coated gutters and window ledges, and floated in a thin scum upon the sea. Perret packed, and, "prepared for a long siege, ascended the mountain by what was the last train to run over the Vesuvian railway for many a day."

Steaming lava streams over a mile long and five hundred feet wide flowed down the mountainside, igniting trees and grape vines and rolling over meadows. High above, a thick, dark, roiling ash column shot up from the crater. The volcano's explosions echoed for twenty miles. Ash collected on the roofs and streets of the towns that ringed the mountain's base – San Giuseppe, Ottaviano, Bosco Reale, Bosco Trecase, Torre Del Greco – and some villagers began evacuating, while others paraded images of the Madonna and San Gennaro. Members of Il Carabinieri Nazionale, Italy's military police force, fanned out across the region to maintain order and aid in evacuation and rescue.

As Perret made his ascent, the mountain trembled like a high-pressure boiler ready to burst. He found Matteucci and half a dozen carabinieri at the Observatory, watching the churning cloud and the glowing lava bombs and black rocks that rocketed hundreds of yards into the sky. In hot volcanic clouds, the friction between the volcanic gas and bits of ash charges the ash with static electricity.

Now, in the densest ash clouds, lightning began to flash, snapping and sparking, cracking like pistols, popping up and down in arcs of all sizes or in starburst flashes when seen end-on. As the hours passed the lightning bolts lengthened, sparking from the plume to the ground and blasting long deep peals of thunder.



Vesuvius had already coughed up enough ash to drift across the continent. In Paris, a strange, dry, yellow fog infused the skies, so dense that boats had trouble navigating the Seine. But the Neapolitans remained calm, comforting themselves with Matteucci's prediction, telegraphed from the peak, that the ash fall was unlikely to last more than a day and that the lava would stop short of the mountain villages. Many said the eruption was fitting preparation for the arrival of Britain's King Edward and Queen Alexandra, due any day on their royal yacht.

At eight o'clock on April 6, a new vent burst open on the cone's southeast side, near the settlement of Casa Fiorenza. Perret, Matteucci, and three of the carabinieri set off to investigate and warn the inhabitants to leave.

They found an arched chamber gushing a river of bright, hissing lava that sped downhill at ten miles an hour. "The lava seemed to be as fluid as water," Perret later wrote. "There were whirls and eddies and waves upon its surface, from which clouds of steam rose in curious shapes, illumined by an intolerable glare. The heat here was terrific – radiant heat from the incandescent mass of this beautiful river of death, heat that caused a pine tree to burst into flame before the lava touched it – and a nearer approach than fifteen feet from the brink was impossible."

Then, with a crack and a roar, a 60-foot fissure ripped open directly in front of them, and a fifteen-foot high curtain of lava shot skyward. Perret snapped away with his camera, cranking rapidly through a roll of film. But when he turned to reload he found that Matteucci and the two carabinieri were sprinting down the mountain, already far away.

Only then did the danger sink in. "With the exception of the experience of dodging some two-ton boulders on the cone a few days earlier," he later wrote, "this was the only time I had run away – and how we did run!" Soon Perret was back, taking more pictures. They followed the lava as it crept through vineyards toward Bosco Trecase, home to ten thousand people.

Elsewhere on the mountain villagers packed every church, praying for escape from certain destruction. In Portici peasants leveled vineyards and trees in hopes of forestalling fire. To the east, in the small town Bosco Reale, weeping women futilely confronted the advancing lava with a statue of St. Anne.

By night, with lava once more jetting high into the sky, rain began to fall. At midnight, when the scientists finally made it back to the observatory, they were drenched to the skin and covered with wet ash.



The volcano shook with ever more powerful explosions and jets of lava. The ash in the cloud became finer and finer, the lightning arcs grew longer, the thunder louder, the pendulums of the Observatory's seismometers danced with greater fervor. "No earthly power could now prevent the catastrophe," Perret wrote.

The following day, April 7, the carabinieri sent artillery carts to help peasants flee. Evacuations began on the mountain's northeast flank in Ottaviano, a town of 20,000.

The Duke Emmanuel Philbert Aosta, the son of King Amadeus of Spain and cousin to Italian king Emanuele III, joined Cardinal Joseph Prisco on a mission to Bosco Reale, the cardinal's home town. The cardinal gave away food, clothing, and even his own rings to the peasants. The Duke ordered soldiers and engineers to erect parapets and dig trenches to divert the lava, and he grabbed a shovel himself to help from time to time.

Perret, Matteucci, and the carabinieri set out for the lava streams flowing southwest toward the hamlet of Casa Bianca. Huge two-ton boulders soared out of the crater, arcing high, shattering on impact, the fragments flying. The men retreated far down slope to circle the cone in safety.

The crater cloud was growing ever higher and wider, and the volcano thundered with staccato explosions two or three times per second. Perret, taking pictures under an umbrella held by one of the carabinieri, noticed that in the instant before the sound reached them, "a thin luminous arc would flash upward and outward from the crater and disappear into space."

Perret realized he was watching sound – the arcs were the explosion's shockwaves, speeding outward from the crater in all directions. These ballooning spheres of energy stretched and compressed the air through which they passed, reflecting and refracting the sunlight in an inflating, glistening ball. To the men on the slope the expanding shell of light was densest, and thus brightest, at the portion they could see edge-on, a slice of speeding circle, a flying arc. It was a graceful, stunning movement, a delicate flash of gossamer against the roiling black ash column and the hulking, sluggish lava. In the midst of the eruption's violence, the arcs struck Perret, the volcano connoisseur, as "one of the most beautiful of all volcanic manifestations." And it happened hundreds of times, again and again.

April 7th 10:40 PM The team descended toward Bosco Trecase, the highest town on Vesuvius's southern slope, built on a ridge thought tall enough to stand above any lava flood. But above the town they met soldiers furiously digging a wide trench, piling up the ash and rock into a thick dam. The panicked townspeople had packed their belongings the day before, only to delay departure when the lava slowed at nightfall.

But now lookouts reported the lava was creeping toward the town at 200 feet an hour. It soon engulfed a house not far above the town. New York Times correspondent Arthur Stanley Riggs watched as a priest and sexton unlocked the doors of an old, whitewashed chapel for a crowd of faithful eager to confront the lava with a statue of Saint Ann. A dozen vineyard workers hoisted the statue onto their shoulders, and set off behind two more who carried a huge cross.

Out through the long, winding street of the town went the float and cross, climbing slowly upward to the little valley where the lava had dared intrude, accompanied by an ever-increasing horde of swart townsfolk, grave and earnest, and irresponsible tourists, armed to the teeth with repeating cameras and long distance binoculars.

It was a beautiful sight. The town, old and gray and soft in its minor coloring, lent itself picturesquely to the scene. There seemed no incongruity, no mediaeval superstition in the faith of these simple wine growers in their clouted breeks and gay neckerchiefs, hob-nailed shoes, and their woolen stockings. They climbed through town, and in ten minutes stood before the lava. The bearers set the statue down and set the cross before the lava. By now the crowd, ringed by soldiers, had grown to thousands. Long and earnestly they prayed, and through the murmur of the petition the clank and rasp of the crawling lava made the grimmest of musical obligatos. Here and there some silly tourist laughed, but the fierce eyes of the worried townspeople checked the senseless brutality, and it died away in mutterings... An hour passed, the moments dragging interminably, and the stream coming steadily nearer. A cry rose from the watchers, a bitter, deep throat-ed wail, and the great float and cross moved back out of the blistering heat and the pungent reek of the crumbling pile. The lava looked a live thing, sentient, portentous, evil. Its long brownish-red and gray and black mottled body rippled like the sea, scaled like an armadillo, gnarled like an oak, wound among the curves of the sloping mountain side and crept steadily downward, inch by inch. Steam and smoke and sulphur fumes hissed and rippled upward from it in thin bluish clouds, and heat waves rippled out from it in circles, scorching the faces and hands of the multitude. It looked like a vast moraine of coke and mud covering a live and palpitating body. Clinking and rasping the cooler outside bits of stone chipped off and clamored down to either side and in front as the monster edged its way along. Each scale peeled off, each flake dislodged showed the giant's red tissue beneath... Another hour passed, and again the cry of dismay went up, sullen and heartrending, as the float retreated again. Four o'clock came in turn, and the smudged sun looked for the last time upon the blistered, cracking face of Sant' Anna as her bearers placed her sternly for a last stand.



Desperate now that all their homes were threatened and the saint seemed powerless to avert the impending catastrophe, the simple suppliants redoubled their efforts and the little valley sobbed with prayer. Slower and slower moved the oncoming stream. Little by little the heavy rumblings of Vesuvius quieted down. Bit by bit, instead of by small avalanches, ran the cooler lava, at last ceasing to approach. The image stood firm in the smoke and the cross wavered unsteadily not a yard away from the great mound. The victory was won – Sant' Anna had performed the miracle; the town was safe!

The statue was returned to the chapel to the sound of thankful prayers and firecrackers. But after midnight the lava lumbered over the carabinieri's ditch, crushed their dam, and pushed down the streets in two fuming rivers. Houses blazed, the town's citizens fled, and carabinieri went through the deserted streets door-to-door, rescuing bed-ridden old people who had been left behind by their hapless families.

Novelist F. Marion Crawford was there:

I saw men, women and children and infants, whose mothers carried them at the breast or in their aprons, fleeing in an endless procession. Dogs, too, and cats were on the carts, and sometimes even chickens, tied together by the legs, and piles of mattresses and pillows and shapeless bundles of clothes. All were white with dust. Under the lurid glare I saw one old woman lying on her back across a cart, ghastly white and, if not dead already of fear and heat and suffocation, certainly almost gone. We ourselves could hardly breathe.

The lava ate through the town until it touched Bosco Trecase's cemetery walls. Here, at the edge of consecrated ground, it stopped.

Perret, Matteucci, and their band of carabinieri watched the mountain from Bosco Trecase's railway station. As night fell the lava was a more brilliant orange than it ever had been before, and they could feel the crater's cannonading blasts. Jets of fire shot from the mountaintop, crowning the mountain with spiking rays of lava, lighting up the Gulf of Naples so intensely that observers twenty miles away on the Isle of Capri could read by its glow. Lava torrents oozed over houses and trees and across the railway that circled the mountain's base. More lava poured over the northern rim of the crater, and Perret was certain the heavy liquid core which supported the mountain from within was gone. Vesuvius's throat was empty, open to the magma which lay waiting below, a superheated mass saturated with carbon dioxide and water, now open to the sky and charged to explode.



*Crollo a Monte Uliveto a Napoli.  
1906*

Chart-April-8-330am-pgAt midnight they headed back over the quaking mountain to the Observatory. For hours the mountain vibrated in a continuous earthquake. Walking was near impossible. The scientists could only cross a room by leaning against the walls. At precisely 12:37 AM on the morning of April 8, an especially strong shock jolted the building. Three of the Observatory's four seismometers were thrown completely out of gear and danced spasmodically; the fifteen-inch pendulum on the smallest instrument swung in harmony with the heaving, shuddering building, but slammed repeatedly into the wall.

Perret made his way outside. Since the seismometers were out of whack, he used his own body to measure Vesuvius's tremors. He put his back against a stone wall and felt it swaying back and forth in synchrony with the undulating ground, pulsing in one-second cycles. The mountain was humming. He headed back inside just as cracks shot through the walls above the arched doors and through the floor across the building's entire east-west length.

The scientists ran outside. A mile and a half away a thousand-foot wide, two mile high pillar of fire was soaring into the inky night. As it punched its way skyward, the volcanic column sucked up air from around the mountain, drawing in a ferocious wind from the sea below, a gale so cold that the scientists sought shelter behind a small wooden chalet at the Hotel Eremo where they built a fire and huddled close to keep warm.

Perret described the scene in his book *The Vesuvius Eruption of 1906*.

"The most alarming feature at this time was the continuous increase – each earth-shock felt above the regular pulsation was stronger than its predecessor; each wave-crest on the sea of sound was louder than the one before; the jets of the great fiery geyser shot ever higher into the dark, overhanging pall of blackness that extended over our heads and fell westward in a thick veil, through which, from Naples, could be seen only fitful gleams. But between the Observatory and the crater all was clear, and it becomes increasingly difficult to describe the events of the great culmination in words befitting a scientific book."

At 2:30 AM another jolt nearly knocked them off their feet, and the chalet's timbers shrieked. The soaring column thickened with ash and gobs of lava, and suddenly lightning was everywhere, crackling in long arcs from the ash cloud, zipping down the electric railway's overhead wires to the nearby station, sparking in the station's lightning rods, and zapping from the wires directly to the earth.



*La gente che fugge dai luoghi dell'eruzione*



As they watched, the column of gas, lava, and rock slowly split. One half tilted sideways in a huge, blistering, arching stream like water from a hose. It soared over the Monte Somma, cooled in the air and fell in a titanic bombardment of hot rock and gravel onto the towns on Vesuvius's northwest flanks. It buried the countryside three feet deep, collapsed roofs, leveled buildings, shattered windows, and crushed a church.

Blobs of lava as big as houses showered from the column and splatted down slope in avalanches of fire. By 3 AM the lower funicular station was alight, burning with a clear yellow flame in a landscape that glowed almost everywhere red.

April 9-2 PM The red hot roaring column was coring out the inside of Vesuvius like a blowtorch. At 3:30 AM, another earthquake wrenched the mountain, and the upper cone, cracked and eroded from within, began to cave in, only to be pushed out by the jetting column. It peeled back from the mountaintop Perret said, like the falling petals of a flower.

The volcano roared on. As the sun rose, the rain of nut-sized rocks grew into a hail of seven-pound lumps, pummeling the party until Matteucci and the head of the carabinieri ordered a retreat. Holding their rolled up coats atop their heads to cushion the impact of the plummeting hot stones, they fled downhill to safety.

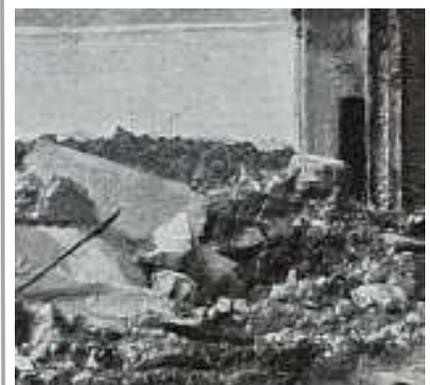
Across the world a New York Times editorial mused about why Matteucci and his unnamed "American assistant" stayed at their post, when they could see so much more from another, safer vantage point. "It is from something more than idle, or even from scientific, curiosity that they are staking their lives on the outcome of successive minutes, any one of which may be their last. If they escape they will have the material for a 'paper' such as has never appeared in the 'transactions' of any society, and he is pessimistic indeed who does not hope that what they learn by braving the mountain's rage will prove to be worth the frightful risk involved in getting it."

But their tenacity did have immediate benefits. The top of the mountain was invisible to those below, "but," Perret wrote, "on the mountain the visibility was perfect." And he could clearly see that the eruption had entered a new phase, a state never described before, visible only to the intrepid party high up on the slopes.

The Giant Plume Vesuvius had cleared its throat – the earthquakes had virtually ceased – and the mountain was an open pipe for a titanic jet of gas that roared up from the bowels of the earth. It vented freely in a continuous, eight-mile high pillar of vapor, a pressurized stream that, six miles in the air, was still violently expanding, bursting into densely textured pure-white clouds.



*Crollo di edifici a Boscotrecase*



The noise was unimaginably loud, a Niagara that rose and fell with a regularity that seemed all of a piece with the cycles Perret had witnessed for months – the ebb and surge of the cone’s volcanic fire, the rolling earthquake waves, the flash of curving lightning, and slow cadence of the sun and moon’s tugging tides that, he was convinced, initiated volcanic action. “The great eruption,” he said, “was a sublime manifestation of rhythm.”

But what struck Perret most of all was the spectacle’s magnificence. Alone with his companions, isolated high above the city in crystalline air, he was a speck face to face with immensity.

Strongest of all impressions received in the course of these remarkable events, greatest of all surprises, and most gratifying of all features to record was, for the writer, that of an infinite dignity in every manifestation of this stupendous releasing of energy. No words can describe the majesty of its unfolding, the utter absence of anything resembling effort, and the all-sufficient power to perform the allotted task and to do it majestically. Each rapid impulse was the crest of something deep and powerful and uniform which bore it, and the unhurried modulation of its rhythmic beats set this eruption in the rank of things which are mighty, grave, and great.

There was present also the element of awe, in all its fullness. The phenomena entered, through their intensity, that sphere where the normal conditions of Nature are overpassed, and one stands in the presence of greater and more elemental forces than any he has known hitherto. This tends to induce a state of mind which hardly recognizes as entirely natural this transformation of the visible universe, and with difficulty one accepts the dictum of reason, that all will pass and the normal return as before; and so, for the many, the events of this and the succeeding days of ashy darkness seemed to show that -- even as the younger Pliny wrote of similar conditions in this same region nearly two thousand years ago – “the last eternal night of story has settled on the world.”

The party tried to return to the Observatory, but were turned back by the thick rain of falling stones. They decided to try again the following morning, and Perret climbed down from the sublime world on the giant’s shoulders to the city.



*Si ricercano tra le macerie i corpi dei malcapitati*



## The eruption. Phase 2

He found chaos. A hundred thousand people had fled Naples since the eruption began, while refugees from the countryside poured into the city by train, street car, army caravan, and steamship. Tourists, fearing tidal waves, abandoned the seafront hotels, and residents of nearby neighborhoods headed for high ground. Falling ash painted the city a desolate gray. Rioting convicts from mountainside jails had been brought to the city's holding pens; their fears infected local prisoners who threatened to rebel.

In the countryside, ash was everywhere, choking livestock and trapping carts piled with belongings and those too weak to walk. Carabinieri struggled to free the living and to dig out the dead, to shovel paths for those who fled carrying all they owned.

"All the roads were full," wrote the New York Times' Riggs, and fugitives by the hundreds trudged warily through the still blinding rain of ashes, going they knew not whither. With daylight a few trains began to run, and every railway station along the line was packed. Tired mothers gave their peevish babies the breast, sitting on the track, while grimy, heavy-eyed fathers and husbands looked gloomily on, too depressed even to talk. Children sank exhausted on platform or rails, crying and munching at great hunks of pasty-looking bread.

Soldiers were everywhere doing police duty; infantry in heavy marching order, with heavy goatskin haversacks; artillerymen, with huge pistols and clanking sabers and spurs; royal engineers in full kit, wearing mattocks, entrenching spades, axes and crowbars fastened to heavy waist belts. Class distinction was forgotten, and ragged peasants crowded into first-class compartments on the trains and in the stations without hindrance, regular passengers forgetting to protest.

All that was left of Bosco Trecase was its church, an island in a sea of steaming stone. The guardian statue of Saint Anne at Torre dell Annunziata was buried, Torre del Greco had been evacuated. To the northwest, San Sebastiano's mayor telegraphed for help; lava was descending rapidly. But red hot stones dropped from the sky, hammered the railroad, delaying aid.

Back in Naples, Perret tersely cabled "Safe. In no danger" to his mother in Brooklyn, the message arriving only hours before the New York Times reported that the Observatory had been destroyed. In Harlem's Little Italy flags flew at half mast, black mourning crepe hung from doors and windows, and benevolent societies and church groups convened meetings to dispense information and raise money for the victims.



Sunrise on the morning of April 9 revealed that a new act in the drama had begun. Vesuvius's plume was now thick, black, and rising much more slowly; the gas pressure which drove the eruption from below was much diminished.

Perret hired a hackney cab and worked his way back toward the Observatory, against the current of peasants seeking sanctuary in the city. They drove their carts and donkeys and trudged on foot with a patient stoicism that owed much to exhaustion: Perret noticed that the children had taken over the evacuation, for they were the ones directing traffic, giving advice, and offering words of encouragement.

The ash cloud's steam rose, cooled, condensed, and fell upon the city as a glutinous rain, turning the inch-deep layer of black sand and powder into a slippery coating of mud. As Perret neared the mountain and climbed the slopes, the rain turned the airborne ash into pisolites -- balls of mud, some as large as hens eggs -- that pummeled him with an ever-thickening hail.

Soon it became impossible for the cab's horse to continue. Perret set off on foot. At Pugliano, a village at the mountain's base, Perret met Mormile, the town's railroad stationmaster. A swarthy man with heavy lidded eyes and upturned moustache, he volunteered to act as a telegrapher, and the two men trudged uphill along the buried bed of the Vesuvian railway.

"Here were enacted scenes like those which Pompeii must have witnessed," Perret wrote. In the gloom "faces peered from doorways, from under wagons, and from every place of shelter from the volcanic storm." That day, in the village church at San Giuseppe on Vesuvius's east side, two hundred people had been attending mass, praying for salvation, when the roof collapsed under a heavy load of ash. Fifty-four died, scores were injured.

At the Observatory, Matteucci eagerly welcomed him, for he had not expected Perret to return. They repaired the seismometers, checked the telegraph, and noted another astonishing volcanic sight -- falling with the now dry ash was a rain of countless squirming caterpillars.

Once more in their hermitage, Perret, Matteucci, Mormile, Brigadier Migliardi and the six carabinieri maintained watch. That evening Matteucci telegraphed to the city that the ash was thick, the windows broken, the instruments askew, that Vesuvius was silently spitting balls of fire, but explosive activity was much diminished. This dispatch, like all the others, was printed and posted in the city and surrounding towns, was a message that "If men could live on the mountain itself," Perret wrote later, "life was surely possible elsewhere."



But life in the Observatory was difficult. Abrasive grit was everywhere, rubbing their eyes raw, plugging their noses, working its way into their ears and clothes, chafing their skin, coating their throats. As they ate their grim diet of bread, cheese, and onions, it ground against their teeth.

They spent endless hours in sunless dust clouds, in an obscurity as black as night that could be felt when they passed their hands through the air. When the clouds cleared they looked out on a colorless landscape, slopes blanketed with white ash and five-story beds of still-blistering rock. Poised precariously and infused with volcanic gas, they were extremely fragile, and with each jolt of the mountain an enormous avalanche swept downhill in stately, ghostly, silence. The avalanches carved the mountain, lacing the peak with gullies full of dry scalding quicksand.

On Tuesday, April 10, the eruption entered its second week. Much of the great gas jet was spent, but enough magma and vapor remained in the volcano to send the ash soaring heavenward from the crater like a thing alive, a tumultuous trunk of hot dust two thousand feet wide. The lightning had ceased, but the column was still so highly charged that, when blown by the wind, it dove to the earth like iron filings drawn to a magnet. On one excursion the exploring scientists crossed this electrified dust cloud. The blue white glow of St. Elmo's fire danced virtually everywhere. The metal stars on the caps of the carabinieri hissed and crackled; their hair stood on end, and when they lifted their fingers or raised their walking sticks they could hear a mechanical humming, what Perret called an "electrical wind." Their bodies sucked ash grains toward their faces with such abrasive force that their lips bled.

*"And there were moments when we were not cheered by Matteucci's remarking, 'This is how Pliny died.'" Perret later termed this the most dangerous moment of his career, for an electrical discharge could have blown them to pieces*

The towns around the volcano were all but cut off. Those who remained waded slowly through the dark streets, their clothing and hair coated with dust, choking, coughing, eyes tearing, rags pressed tight over their noses and mouths. The sun, when visible, was little more than a dim disk in a sick yellow sky. The massive snakes of lava shimmered with heat, shedding clouds of steam and wisps of greenish, sulfurous vapors. The broken bodies of the dead were dug free from fallen walls and roofs, rubble-filled basements, and church confessionals. Some clutched rosaries and pictures of saints, others jewels and gold. There were violent storms of stinging black rain, steaming fields of rough black stone, charred tree trunks, and the disconsolate cries of the lost, hurt, and grieving.



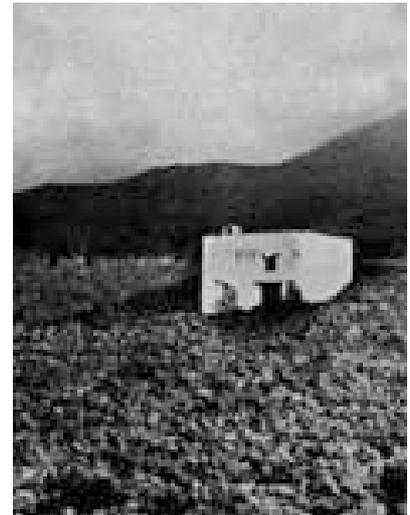
A rescue party of soldiers fought their way through the darkness and rain toward Ottaviano with a train of four-horse carts laden with supplies. On arrival they unloaded the cars and invited as many children and aged to climb on board, then turned toward safety. But after a few hundred feet, the horses, in ash to their flanks, could no longer pull their loads. The children panicked, leapt from the carts and scattered in the darkness. They were never found.

When the sun rose on April 11, lava had coated much of Vesuvius's western flank with a great swathe of dull brown stone. Windblown ash had dropped mostly east of the volcano in an oval ten miles long and thirty miles wide. It was thought that five thousand houses were destroyed or uninhabitable and fifty thousand were homeless. Property damage was in the tens of millions, crops and vineyards had vanished, and tens of thousand of refugees were still on the move, swarming out of the districts where the ash lay thick and swamping neighboring towns, looking for shelter and begging for food.

It was thought the effort demanded 100,000 men, a situation so dire and chaotic, newspapers said, that only General Antonio Baldissera, ex-commander of Italy's Ethiopian forces, could set things right. Soldiers doled out free meals, built temporary shelters, and shoveled cinders from house tops into heaps six feet deep. Firemen and ambulance crews from Rome and Palermo arrived. In some deserted mountain towns, looting began.

The sky over Naples was a chocolate brown, and grey dust covered everything, a choking powder so fine that its grains were almost invisible, yet so dense that it formed a solid curtain one hundred yards ahead. It swallowed all sounds like a snowstorm, save for the incessant scraping shovels. "Even voices seem muffled," said the New York Times, "but that may be due to the utter depression which now lies upon what is generally the noisiest of cities." Shops and factories, theaters and cafes, banks and restaurants were closed. The many glass-covered galleries around city were locked tight, for fear their arching roofs would fall. The prisoners in the Naples city jail finally snapped; they broke open doors and rushed out into the corridors until they were beaten back by guards. Candles burned before every sacred statue on the city streets, and despairing penitents wandered about with more icons in their arms until they set them down in the open air where candles were almost immediately placed around them.

Now and again street cars rumbled by in the fog, the friction of their wheels igniting sulfur in the ashes, sparking tiny flames along buried trolley rails. And if the Naples roads were horrible, elsewhere they were impassable. Engineers halted train service from the city because even at noon it was too dark to drive.



King Victor Emmanuel and Queen Elena, hurrying to the city from Rome, opened the royal palaces of San Ferdinando and Capodimonti for injured refugees. They visited hospitals, then set out for Ottaviano by car. When the ash became too thick to drive through, the king continued on horseback, while Queen Elena turned back, the New York Times reported, "because the task was not one suitable for a woman." The king pushed on through four feet of ash. At Ottaviano, the king saw 129 bodies that had been pulled from ruins of the church. A near-riot took place at Torre dell'Annunziata when the church, deemed unsafe, was ordered closed. In San Giuseppe, soldiers set up a tent camp in the town square, near the linen shrouded bodies, laid out and awaiting burial.

Despite the rescue efforts, the residents seemed at their breaking point. Some said that the city was doomed and blamed the authorities for so many deaths. Yet even as the newspapers continued to report the Observatory's destruction, a timely dispatch was tapped over the telegraph wires. "If my words could influence the population," Matteucci cabled, "they would be words of encouragement and sympathy, for I am most confident that Vesuvius will soon return to its normal conditions." And, he added, the mountain's topmost 820 feet had disappeared.

### The eruption. Phase 3

Tourists began to arrive by boat and train. Robert Underwood Johnson of the Century magazine came from Rome. He wrote of the terrifying thrill of the journey, rattling along past the ghostly torches of the railway guards beneath the churning plume which canted toward Capri over the track like a solid mass in the intense moonlight. Leaving the train, his party hiked past the Torre Annunziata's cemetery, climbed a wall of cooling lava, and watched the sun rise over a desolate smoking landscape that had been deluged with stone. Bosco Trecase's church and a few houses poked above the surface like stumps in a swamp. As war ships evacuated refugees from Naples, the 306-foot American steam yacht Nahma arrived at Palermo. Its owner, Harriet Goelet, wife of a New York financier, told the Times she had watched the eruption with a party of friends. On the twelfth, soldiers arrived at the Observatory and shoveled six tons of ash off of a single portion of the roof. The following day Matteucci telegraphed to the city that activity had diminished and that "I predict with reserve that in two or three days calm will reign." The dispatch was greeted with joy, and worshippers crammed Good Friday services, offering prayers of thanksgiving.



A wind shift took the ash to the east, and although Vesuvius hid itself from view, the sun shone down over the dusty city, the blue sea sparkled, and the Neapolitans shed their hats and goggles and once more went about in open carriages. The king, queen, and government ministers supervising the relief work returned to Rome, after the queen donated \$10,000 worth of linen to the cause. *“Everything was coated with a thin white powder,”* the Times said. “The crowds at the stations resembled millers, their clothing covered with powder. Like a Dakota prairie after a blizzard, except that everything is gray instead of white. The ashes lie in drifts knee deep. Villas, trees, and churches have been beaten with gray mud on the sides exposed to the volcanic storm.” Ten miles north of Naples the plume was so thick that telegraph poles twenty feet away were lost in the gloom, breathing was difficult, and eyes watered.

On April 14, the royal palace in Rome announced that the king was awarding Matteucci the rank of Commander of the Order of the Crown. Relief contributions began to pour in from around the world. New Yorkers sent \$10,000, and proceeds were promised from a benefit concert at the Metropolitan Opera House featuring the top talents then in the city. Frank Farrell, owner of the fledgling New York Yankees, offered his share of the gate receipts from a game with the Boston Red Sox. More money came from the president of Cuba and the mayors of Indianapolis and Jersey City.

On Easter Sunday, April 15, Vesuvius’s column began to shrink. And like a sign of heaven and hope, rescuers discovered two elderly women buried alive at Ottaviano. Their house had crumbled around them; protected by fallen rafters, they had survived on food which, by chance, they had in their pockets. At the Observatory the seismometers were quiet, and all seemed peaceful yet eerie. “During this gray day there prevailed a presentation of negativity that is impossible to describe,” Perret wrote. “As far as the eye could reach, there was not one note of color; all was of one uniform neutral tint. There were immense spaces of absolute silence, broken only by the distant tolling of a bell or the siren wail of some steamer seeking its way across the dust-enshrouded bay. The only visible outlines were the nearly formless details of ash-bedecked lava-flows in the immediate vicinity, and the Vesuvian landscape showed in almost imperceptible relief against the gray boundaries of our little world.”

Over the next three days the sky remained clear, the weather calm and warm. The volcano’s plume rose steadily, but the earthquakes and explosions had all but ended. It seemed as if peace, at last, had returned to the damaged land. The refugees began to trickle back to their mountain villages to dig out their homes.



Near the Observatory about fifty people – dozens of men, children, one woman – had come home. With the sound of shovels there was also voices and laughter; movement and color had returned. But Vesuvius was not quite finished.

April 18 dawned bright and clear. But at noon, the wind freshened, turned, and began to blow across the peak toward the Observatory. Soon the sun was gone, for the now gale-force wind was strong enough to bend the ash cloud to the earth, plunging the hillside into darkness.

Inside, the scientists and carabinieri began to have trouble breathing. Their legs felt oddly warm, their bodies weak, and an odd sense of mental depression overcame them. Carbon dioxide gas, invisible and heavier than air, was pouring down upon them, flowing along the slope and into the building, threatening them with suffocation. Their thoughts turned to the refugees outside. A disaster was in the making.

Outside, as the wind-whipped ash scoured the skin from their faces, Perret, Matteucci, and the carabinieri tried to herd the people into some nearby workers' barracks. But the buildings were too small. They were trapped. The road was buried. And when they dared open their eyes against the coarse ash blizzard, the visibility was mere inches. The Observatory, lost in the gloom, might as well have been sixty miles, not sixty yards, away.

Then someone found a rope. All fifty members of the party grabbed it. One man gripped the barracks door while the rope was tied around his waist. Another, who knew the area, took hold of the rope's free end and set out up the hill. The rope was paid out, and the party snaked after him as he swept back and forth, gasping, groping through the gloom. When he stumbled on a telegraph pole, he recognized it as one that brought the telegraph line to the observatory. The word passed down the rope. The man at the end let go the barracks door, and the group followed the rope to the telegraph pole. The leader set out again, fumbling forward into the darkness, weaving back and forth until he touched another recognizable landmark. Again the rope was drawn up, and again he moved forward. Like a giant inch worm, the head feeling its way forward, the tail drawing in behind, the party finally found the Observatory.

They crowded into the basement. Even here the ash was so thick that a lantern only dimly lit the room. The band felt as if they were sitting in black soup – they could feel the darkness. They sat for hours, coughing and wheezing, rousing each other when they lapsed into unconsciousness, spitting ash, wiping their eyes.

At midnight the wind stopped. The plume rose. Air returned to the mountaintop. And one member of the party, a bronchitic young man of nineteen, lay dead.

By April 22, the eruption was finally over. The seismometers were quiet, their needles sleeping. At night, the once glowing crater was finally dark, and its cloud was white – water vapor, no ash.

In Naples, six thousand men shoveled ashes into alleys and narrow byways, clogging the streets and sidewalks. Carriages and skittish horses struggled in the streets, but the sun had returned and there was a festive, celebratory air.

Vesuvius still towered over Naples, but now its graceful cone was a baked, burned sore. The top of its cone had been blasted away; the crater bored out to 700 yards wide. Vesuvius had coughed out an estimated 275 million cubic yards of ash, and spat out more than 15 million cubic yards of lava on its southeast flank. Ash had drifted as far as Croatia. Over 500 were dead, 800 wounded, and 80 thousand people were driven from their homes.

For many, the trouble was just beginning. For months, rain would turn the ash into lethal torrents of mud, boulders, and lava blocks that roared through villages carrying people and houses away. In May, a mudslide chased even Matteucci from the Observatory.

But in those sunny April days, Perret still watched the mountain as the first of a parade of distinguished visitors trudged up the narrow paths dug through the ash to pay their respects to the scientists who had braved Vesuvius's wrath.

It is interesting to note how Perret later listed them in his book on the Vesuvius eruption. He begins with the Duke and Duchess of Aosta, who he lauds for helping the local citizens, then he lists the volcanologists who had witnessed the eruption from afar and now came up to shake his hand -- Alfred La Croix who established a classification system for volcanic eruptions and whose detailed description of the Mount Pelee eruption broke new ground; Henry Johnston-Lavis who had made the first detailed Vesuvius map and collected thousands of specimens; MIT's Thomas Jaggar who was establishing new guidelines for volcanic exploration; Swiss pharmacist Albert Brun who had speculated on the make-up of magma on volcanic gasses; and Tempest Anderson who had spent years studying volcanoes in the Caribbean, Europe and Asia. And, as if by afterthought, he mentions, at the end of the list, Edward VII and Alexandra, King and Queen of England, ex-Empress Eugenie, tea tycoon Sir Thomas Lipton, and other notables left unnamed.



Tom Gidwitz



## Testo manoscritto di Stanislao Ascione. (1928)

Quanto mai preziosa questa testimonianza autografa dello storico torrese. Il testo è fluido e preguo di significati. Colpisce la particolare attenzione agli eventi vulcanici. Il presente testo è tratto da un lavoro dell'autore dedicato alla storia del Vesuvio.

La grande eruzione del 7-8 aprile 1906

Tutto è silenzio...  
Qual leon che rugge  
Treme il Vesuvio  
E l'era sua repressa  
In un balen disfrena...

Nel mese di maggio dell'anno 1900 iniziò questa grande eruzione con forti boati e pioggia di pietre e brandelli di lava incandescenti. Nel mese di aprile 1906 il VESUVIO cominciò a mandare in alto colonne di fuoco e pietre roventi le quali cadevano nel gran cratere con forti detonazioni. Era quello uno spettacolo assai triste, erano momenti di forti emozioni e quei fenomeni porgevano alla mente del dotto materia di profonda meditazione! Un'afa molesta avvolgeva l'aria tutta e la Città. Quella del 7 aprile 1906 fu una notte orribile che giammai sarà dimenticata. Ognuno trepidava per la propria vita, per la propria terra, per la propria casa. Alle ore 9,45 un forte rombo annunciava l'apertura di una bocca eruttiva nelle vicinanze di BOSEOTRECASE e con inaudita violenza veniva fuori un gran torrente di fuoco misto a scorie e lapillo. Quel torrente distruggeva buona parte di Boseo e investiva la Chiesa di S. ANNO e proseguendo il suo cammino si dirigeva velocemente



Verso TORRE ANNUNZIATA ma qui per fortuna si fermò vicino al muro di quel Cimitero. Ecco il telegramma che in quella notte il sindaco di BOSCO inviava al Prefetto.

— La lava ignea minaccia di insadere l'abitato Reclamano di urgenza truppe sufficienti, carri di artiglieria per il trasporto delle masserizie. Il pericolo è gravissimo e imminente — Il Direttore dell'osservatorio Vesuviano Prof. Matteucci così telegrafava al commissario di P.S. di Torre del Greco, cav. Ventimiglia — 7 aprile ore 2. La metà del Cono è precipitata nel Cratere provocando un'eruzione violentissima di massi ignei che hanno danneggiato molto specie dalla parte di OTTAVIANO. La corrente lavica dirigendosi verso BOSCO TRE CASE ha incominciato a rabilirsi procedendo sulle antiche lave con maggiore violenza. Anche la corrente su OTTAVIANO ha una grande attività e si prevedono okanni gravissimi per BOSCO TRE CASE e TORRE DEL GRECO.

Firmato MATTEUCCI.

L'attività del Cratere era spaventosa. Un gran pino di cenere saliva a grandi altezze e ricadeva su TORRE DEL GRECO ed altri Comuni Vesuviani. Quel gigantesco pino di cenere si estendeva fino all'isola di CAPRI ed avvolgeva tutto il golfo in una profonda oscurità. Seguì una pioggia d'acqua calda mista a lapillo — Il giorno dopo una grande pioggia di lapillo cadde su OTTAVIANO distruggendola quasi tutta. Distrusse ancora parte di S. GIUSEPPE VESUVIANO con la sua Chiesa parrocchiale ove erano raccolte 120 persone che perirono tutte!.

Furono distrutti 2500 ettari di terreno e danneggiati 51.000 ettari e vi furono 550 morti e 800 feriti.

## Inno alla Madonna della Neve

**Di Vincenzo Marasco**

Nel corso della stesura dei vari articoli riguardanti l'evento commemorativo dell'eruzione vesuviana del 1906, ero come accecato da sete di conoscenza tanto che mi spingevo a cercare nei vari archivi delle chiese delle città di Boscotrecase e Torre Annunziata, notizie e documenti che parlavano di questo evento, un indizio, un piccolo scritto, tutto era utile per portare avanti la mia ricerca e per far sì che riuscissi a dare quel tocco di originalità alla stesura degli articoli.

Era facile a leggere solo dei libri e fare un sunto di quello che gli altri scrissero, ma io volevo qualcosa di più, tanto che una mattina del Gennaio scorso mi recai all'Ave Gratia Plena di Torre Annunziata per scambiare qualche parola con Mons. Russo, e magari per carpire qualche informazione che mi poteva aiutare, ma il suo indirizzamento verso la saletta della sacrestia dove venivano conservati alcuni documenti della diocesi, fu propiziatorio.

Carte, carte e ancora carte che parlavano della storia passata della basilica, documenti dei festeggiamenti passati riguardanti le varie commemorazioni sempre dell'evento eruttivo, ma il mio occhio cadde subito su tre fogli contenenti alcuni spartiti dell'epoca, in quel caso che potevo fare, chiedendo alla persona addetta di cosa si trattava, lui mi rispose che erano dei fogli dove era scritto "Della musica" ma niente di più.

Per me quel niente di più, "Quella musica" come erano stati chiamati quei fogli erano tutt'altro che dei fogli insignificanti, anzi, leggendo le intestazioni e gli autori, subito mi convinsi della sensazionalità dei documenti tanto che con la mia macchina digitale non potei far a meno di scattare qualche foto e di chiedere delle copie al responsabile da inserire nel mio archivio.

Come non dire che quando si scopre un documento inedito non si sente una certa emozione, come non pensare che riportare alla luce antichi testi o anche semplici testimonianze di qualcosa che fu non può dare a chi lo fa un senso di soddisfazione immenso. Questo è quello che ho provato quando sono riuscito a portare fuori da quei falconi dimenticati quei tre "pezzi di carta" oramai declassati a materiale d'archivio conservati in quel posto solo grazie alla cura di qualcuno altrimenti andavano perduti.

La ricerca è importantissima, specie quando una persona si fa attrarre dalla sete del sapere e soprattutto invogliato da progetti e da persone che ti spingono oltre fino a quando non si riesce a mettere insieme quel qualcosa che rivaluta il passato portandolo alla conoscenza di chi magari ne ignorava l'esistenza, ecco, questo per me è l'inedito.

In questi giorni sono ritornato da Mons. Russo per dargli atto di quello che siamo riusciti a fare con quei tre "Pezzi di Carta": "Le parole e la musica di cento anni fa, grazie a quei fogli nascosti, sono diventati una realtà", gli ho riferito.

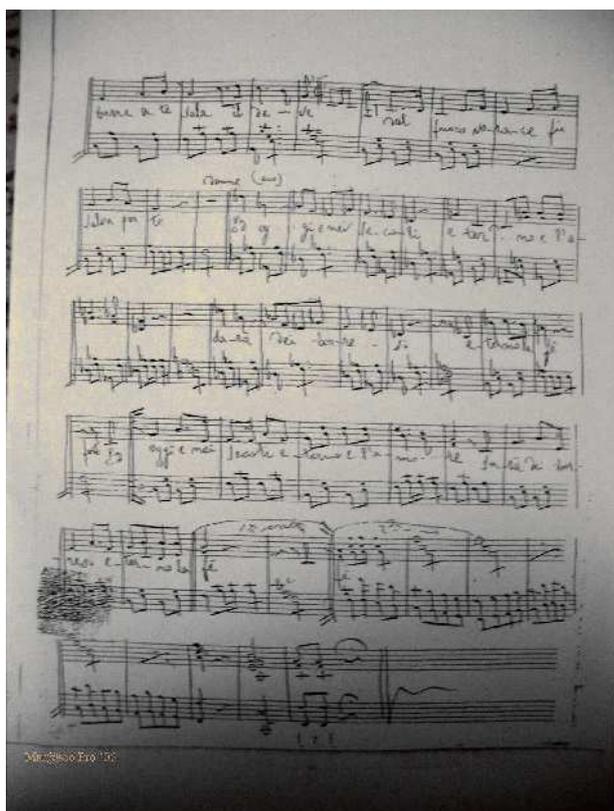
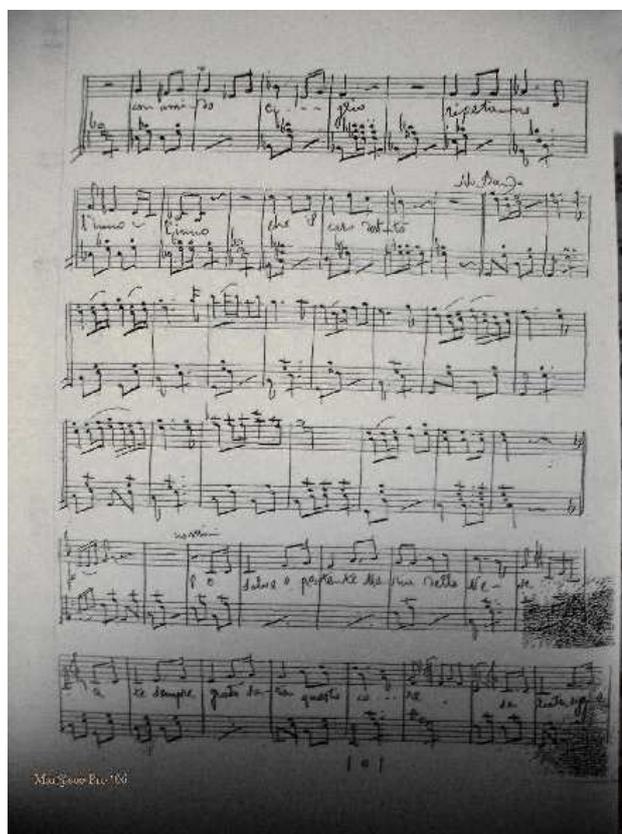
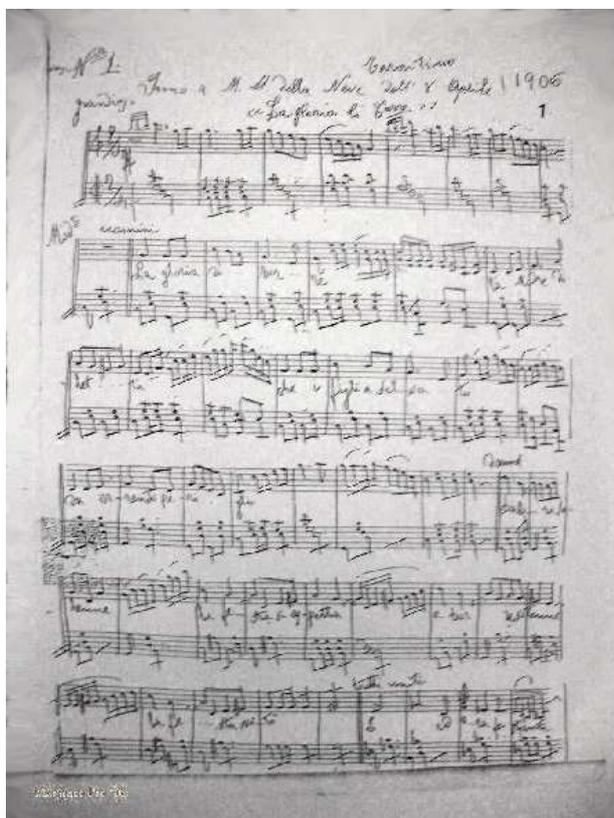
Le sue parole sono state di incommensurabile gioia e di ringraziamenti, mi chiedeva cosa ci spingeva a tanto? Cosa gli potevo rispondere io, nel mio piccolo: "Sete di conoscenza, Padre, e niente altro".

Spero che questo mio breve scritto possa essere d'esempio e dare quel senso di disinteressamento del portare a termine qualche cosa richiedendone l'investimento di quel poco tempo libero che riusciamo ad avere fuori dalla nostra vita lavorativa per poi riessere ripagato con la soddisfazione dataci dal lettore o da chi come noi cerca e ricerca cose che incrementano la nostra conoscenza culturale.

# Inno alla Madonna della Neve 8 aprile 1906

A cura di Vincenzo Marasco

“La gloria di Torre” Di Tarantino  
Grandioso



VERSI DI MONS. AGNELLO PRISCO  
MUSICA DEL MAESTRO M. TARANTINO

*LA GLORIA DI TORRE, LA MADRE DILETTA,  
CHE I FIGLI HA SALVATO DA ORRENDO PERIGLIO,  
DA LORO, SOLENNE LA FESTA SI ASPETTA,  
E TORRE SOLENNE LA FESTA VOTÒ:  
ED ORA FESTANTI, CON UMIDO CIGLIO,  
RIPETONO L'INNO CHE IL CORO DETTÒ*

*OH! SALVE O POTENTE MARIA DELLA NEVE,  
A TE SEMPRE GRATO SARÀ QUESTO CORE:  
SE LIETA OGGI È TORRE, A TE SOLO IL DEVE  
DAL FUOCO VORACE FU SALVA PER TE:  
ED OGGI E NEI SECOLI, ETERNO L'AMORE  
SARÀ DEI TORRESI, ETERNA LA FÈ.*

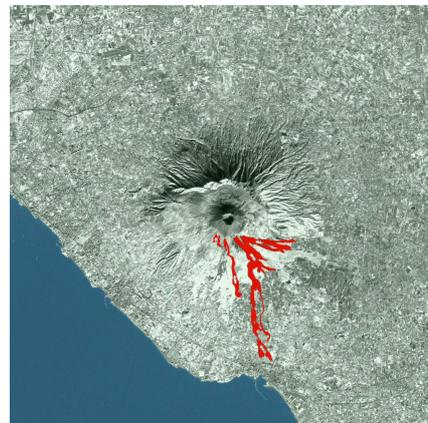
ARCHIVIO STORICO BASILICA PONTIFICIA AVE  
GRATIA PLENA DI TORRE ANNUNZIATA

## La Topografia Vesuviana e l'eruzione del 1906

Di Aniello Langella

Nel '900 dobbiamo certamente annoverare e rimarcare l'evento eruttivo del 1906. Fu sicuramente nel secolo il fenomeno più forte. Tra il 4 e il 7 aprile di quell'anno si verificarono enormi spaccature in alto intorno alla quota 750. Dell'evento abbiamo una cronaca d'eccezione, scritta dal Mercalli, il quale divide il fenomeno in tre fasi principali.

Nella prima fase, iniziò il 4 aprile, con una frattura sul fianco sud del cratere e con conseguente colata lavica. Questo moneto coincise con l'esordio del fenomeno. Due giorni dopo si aprirono altre fratture a livelli altimetrici più bassi intorno ai 660 metri. Da queste fratture si generarono flussi lavici che si diressero verso Boscotrecase e verso il cimitero di Torre Annunziata dove si arrestarono a circa 10 metri. Tra il 5 e il 6 sulle città di Ottaviano e San Giuseppe Vesuviano piovvero proiettili vulcanici e prodotti cineritici che raggiunsero spessori di circa 1,25 metri. Tutta la regione venne interessata dalla pioggia di piroclastici che invasero, strade, piazze e si depositarono su molti edifici che sotto il peso crescente subirono danni ingenti. Proprio a causa di questi insoliti carichi, si verificò il crollo della volta della Parrocchia di San Giuseppe Vesuviano causando la morte di oltre 100 persone.



La seconda fase, quella che venne definita culminante, durò circa 18 ore e fu caratterizzata da un'attività prevalentemente gassosa. Dal fianco del Vesuvio si generò una vera e propria fontana di lava di elevata energia che raggiunse i 600 metri di altezza.

Nella terza fase che si annunciò intorno al 12 e durò dal 13 al 14 aprile. In questi giorni la pioggia di cenere e di prodotti di caduta fu molto forte. Sui fianchi del Vesuvio e sulle città si accumularono tonnellate di prodotti vulcanici. Contemporaneamente la presenza di piogge da condensazione generò grandi colate fangose che si diressero verso Ottaviano travolgendo casolari ed entrando nel centro della città. Al termine dell'eruzione il cono del Vesuvio si era abbassato di circa 100 metri.

Le bocche principali si aprirono in località Piazzale a circa 733 metri in un ampio bacino che presto guadagnò il pendio verso sud est in direzione Boscotrecase.

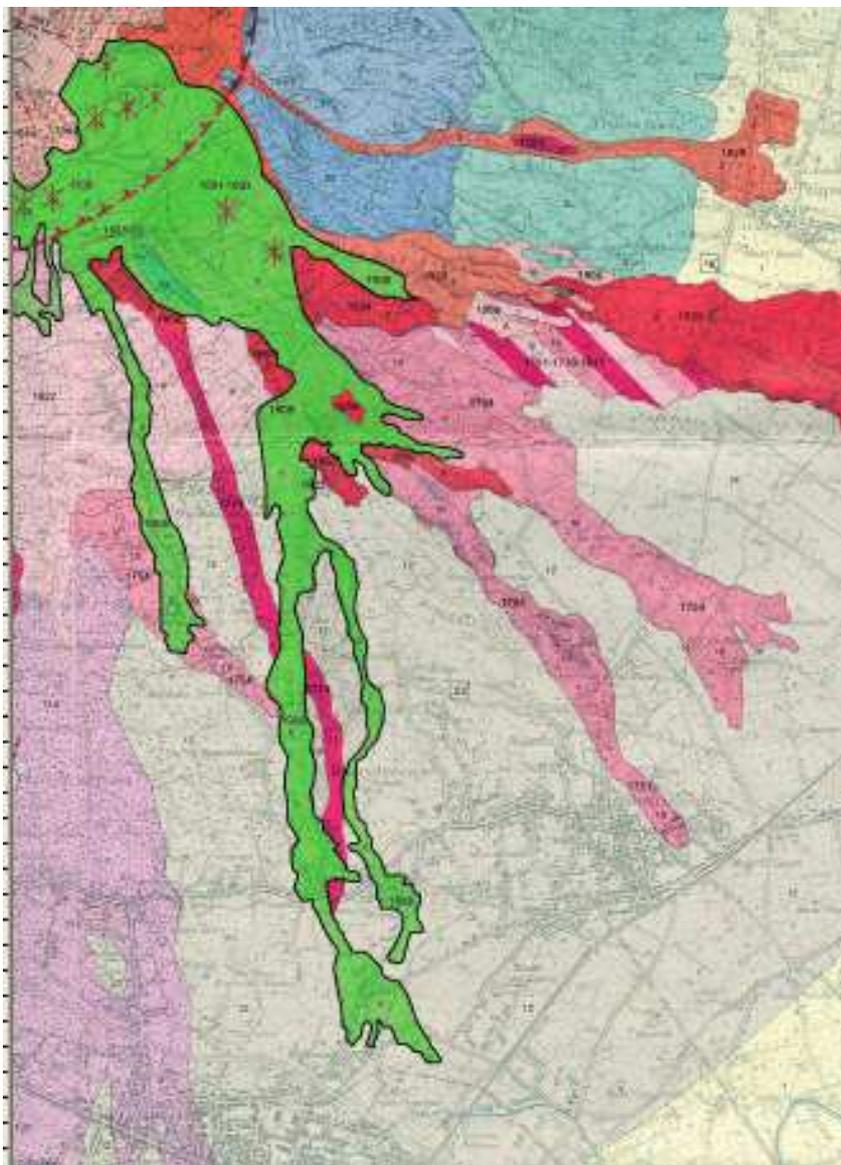
Possiamo in sintesi individuare tre rami principali che scesero attraverso naturali pendii. Il ramo sud dopo circa 300 metri si arrestò presso la Località Magliolo a ridosso del fianco sud del 1822

Il ramo centrale e nord generati dalle bocche in Località Cagnoletto scesero rapidamente verso sud est in direzione dei paesi a valle. La larga colata lavica alla sua origine generò un fronte di circa 500 metri e si diresse verso la Località Magliolo sul versante nord del 1822.

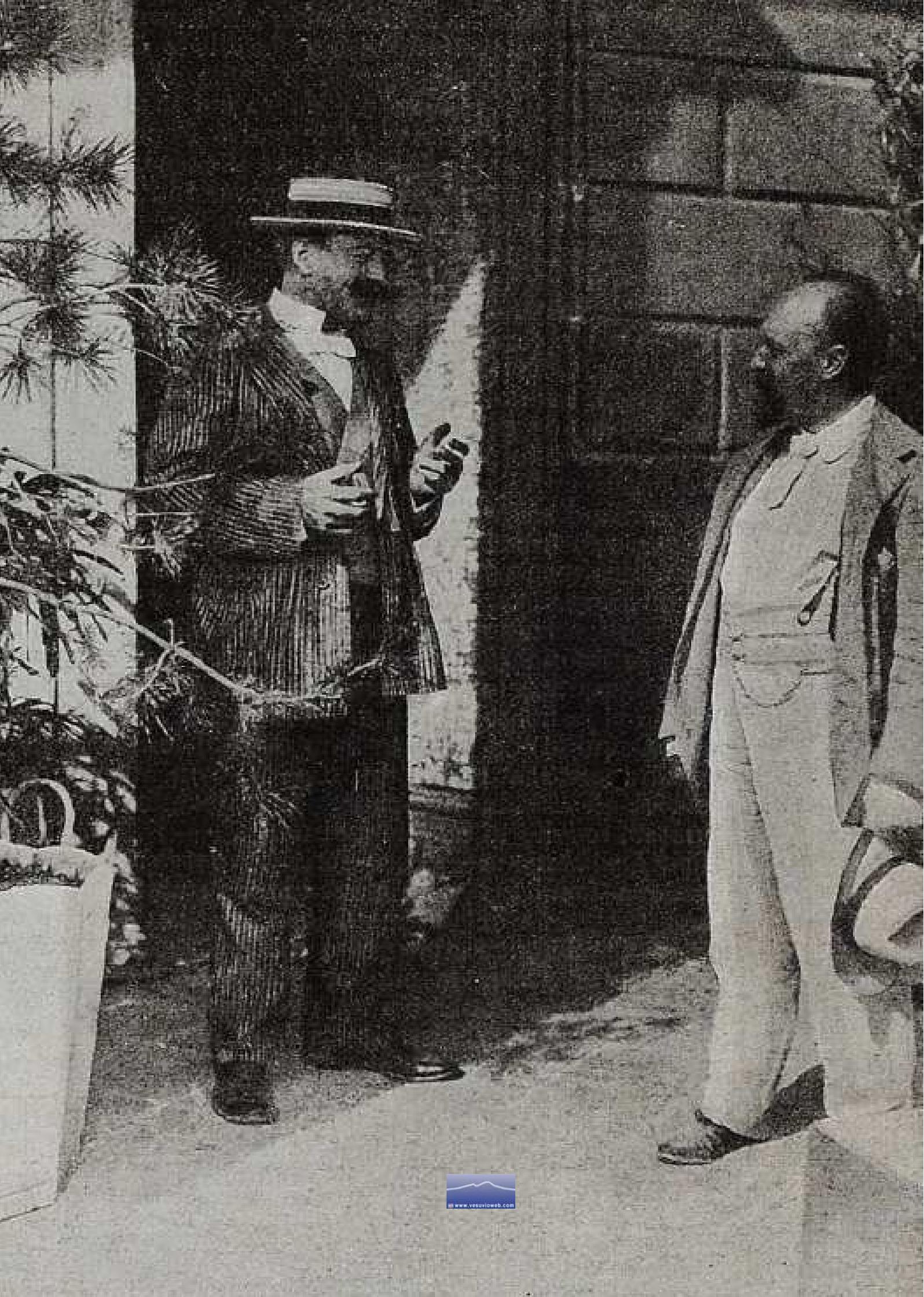
Il ramo più nord si arrestò davanti al Pennino del Mercante e si spaccò in un ramo centrale che scende verso Boscotrecase dividendosi in due lunghi corsi.

Il corso nord si diresse verso la Località Campanariello posta a quota 185 , poi verso la Località Cinque Vie posta a quota 140. Un altro sottile ramo passò nei pressi della Località Masseria del Carceriere situata a quota 276, quindi lambì il cimitero di Boscoreale e poi lentamente si diresse verso Torre Annunziata.

Nella cartina che segue il corso lavico del 1906 in relazione alle altre colate sul versante est del Vesuvio.



Tratta e modificata da "Quaderni de - La ricerca scientifica- ". CNR 1987



## Le immagini mostravano e raccontavano

Di Vincenzo Marasco

### Il Dramma di Boscoreale

Prima dell'eruzione il Vesuvio si presentava agli occhi dei napoletani diversamente da come si presenta oggi giorno, esso misurava circa 1335 metri e la sua vetta a punta rassomigliava più ad una montagna che ad un vulcano distinguendosi per il pennacchio che all'epoca non mancava mai alla sua estremità accompagnato da qualche brontolio, e forse per questo i napoletani dell'epoca gli donarono l'appellativo "A' muntagna bbella".

Ma il 4 Aprile del 1906, il Vesuvio smise ancora una volta di essere "A muntagna bella" accogliendo il nuovo secolo con una delle sue terribili eruzioni facendo ricordare ancora una volta ai napoletani la sua indomabile presenza

Nessuna delle città vesuviane, compresa Napoli furono risparmiate dalla furiosa eruzione del Vesuvio che imperversava facendo cadere su di esse tonnellate e tonnellate di ogni sorta di detrito vulcanico.

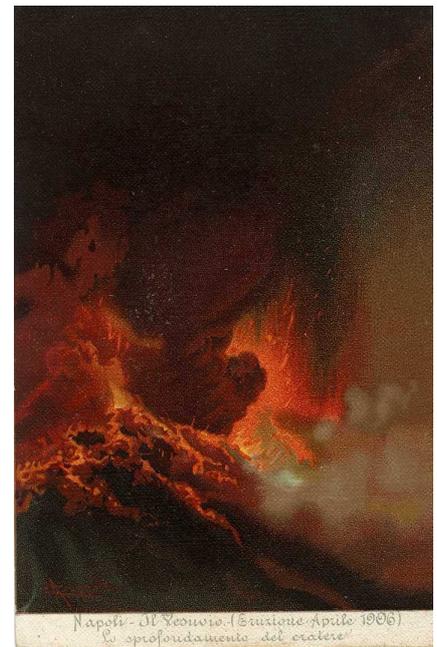
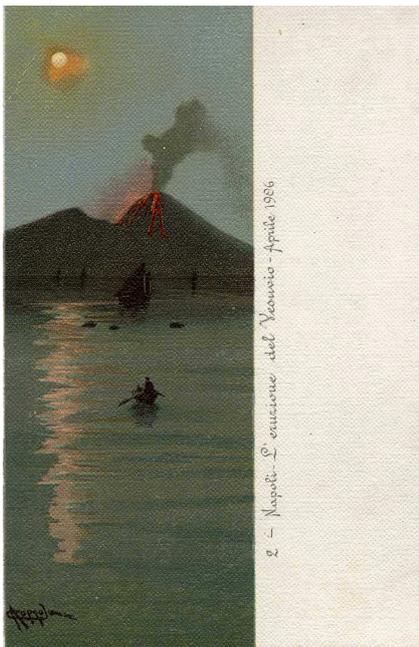
Napoli non fu direttamente interessata dall'eruzione anche se durante il giorno 5 Aprile 1906, sotto l'effetto dei venti da sud, i detriti vulcanici raggiunsero la città ricoprendone una vasta zona facendo ricorrere ai cittadini all'utilizzo degli ombrelli e allo sgombero delle strade dai detriti. Ma la situazione divenne ancor più preoccupante quando il giorno 8 verso sera la nube di ceneri si rivolto ancora verso Napoli investendo con un intensa pioggia di detriti le città comprese da Torre del Greco a salire dove si ebbero accumuli notevoli di cenere e lapillo. Purtroppo la tragedia non si fece attendere, sotto il peso delle ceneri crollò la tettoia del mercato di Monteoliveto, nell'attuale Piazza Carità causando la morte di 11 persone e 30 feriti.



Foto 1 – Un panorama di Torre Annunziata in una cartolina dei primi anni del '900 edita da Giuseppe Maggi di Torre Annunziata (Na)



Foto 2 – Veduta del Vesuvio dal porto di Torre del Greco poco prima dell'eruzione edita nel 1906 dalla Richter & Co. (Na)



Img. 3, 4, 5 – Tre cromolitografie dell'illustratore Coppola edite dalla casa editrice napoletana Ettore Ragozino nel 1906.



Foto 6 e 7 - Due cartoline edite nel 1906 dalla Richter & Co di Napoli raffigurano lo sgombero dei detriti dalle strade di Napoli e una veduta dell'eruzione da Resina.

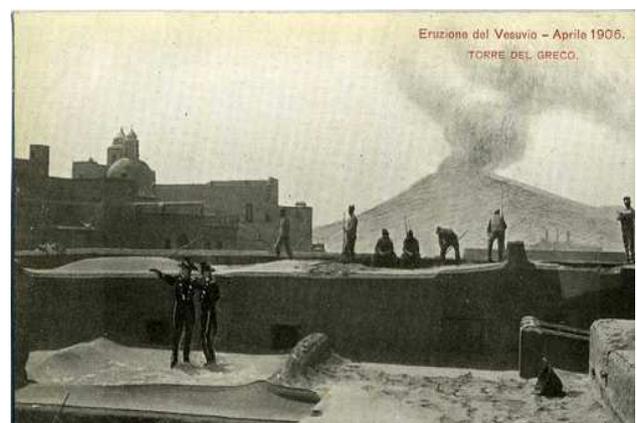


Foto 8 – Una veduta edita nel 1906 dalla Richter & Co. delle strade di Torre del Greco durante i giorni dell'eruzione invase dai detriti.  
Foto 9 – Un foto bozzetto edito nel 1906 dalla A. Scrocchi di Milano, aut. Luca Camerio, raffigurante lo sgombero dei materiali vulcanici dai tetti delle abitazioni di Torre del Greco

In occasione dell'eruzione, la scrittrice napoletana **Matilde Serao** per i paesi sopra citati così scrisse il giorno 22 Aprile 1906 sul quotidiano il "Mattino":

*"Il nostro spirito si deprime profondamente, e più ci rende tristi il silenzio immenso e l'abbandono di Resina e di Torre del Greco, le belle cittadine fra i giardini degli aranci e il mare.*

*Squallore, come non mai, squallore come in città donde tutta la vita fosse sparita, donde ogni forma di vita qualsiasi si fosse dileguata; città di sogno, Portici, Resina, Torre del Greco, senz'anima più, città abbandonate, città morte, come se da anni e anni fossero abbandonate e morte.*

*E non vi è nessuno che ci narri quale e quanto sia stato il panico che ha fatto fuggire di notte, all'alba, nella mattinata; ma noi lo conosciamo, ma noi lo immaginiamo, poiché vediamo, sì, coi nostri occhi mortali, vediamo l'abbandono e la morte. Ma vissero mai Portici, Resina e Torre del Greco? Vi furono persone, un tempo, in queste case e in queste vie?*

*Colossale si leva il pino di cenere sulla montagna: e cenere, e nuvole, e vapori nulla ci fanno scorgere, se non le saette frequenti, di colori svariati, le cento saette che tagliano il grigio livido, il grigio opaco; e la vita è solo lì sul monte di orrore, e qui nulla è vivo più".*

Intanto l'eruzione assumeva caratteristiche sempre più spaventose, dopo il giorno 5 i venti cambiarono di quadrante e si disposero da Nord facendo ricadere sui paesi esposti i detriti vulcanici, e intanto alle pendici del vulcano, il giorno 6 Aprile, si aprivano le prime bocche effimere che iniziavano ad emettere minacciose correnti laviche di cui una in particolare prese la direzione di Boscotrecase puntando verso l'abitato. Durante la nottata del giorno 7 lingua di fuoco nata dalla bocca apertasi il giorno prima all'estremità NE dei Cognoli e diretta verso Boscotrecase assunse proporzioni sempre più ragguardevoli, e percorrendo circa 285 metri l'ora iniziò a minacciare seriamente l'abitato. Il popolo di Boscotrecase, che fin dalle prime ore dell'alba si rese conto del pericolo che incombeva, accorsero senza perdere tempo alla chiesa di S. Anna patrona dell'abitato per chiedere patrocinio. Il padre valutando la pericolosità della situazione fece opposizione alla folla per il trasporto della sacra statua della Madonna contro la lava, ma il popolo non ammise ragioni, e dopo pochi istanti una processione preceduta da una rozza croce di legno seguita dalla statua della Santa patrona accompagnata da una vastissima folla di fedeli capeggiati da Don Carmine Russo parroco della parrocchia del rione Oratorio, si avviarono invocando il miracolo verso il luogo del disastro.



Il Vesuvio in eruzione visto dal porto di Torre del Greco.

8313



Torre del Greco (Napoli) - Una via coperta di cenere.

8309

Foto 10 e 11 – Altre due stupende immagini edite del 1906 dalla Richter raffigurano il Vesuvio durante i primi giorni dell'eruzione e una delle strade di Torre del Greco invasa dalle ceneri.

A mezzogiorno del 7 Aprile, dinanzi alla statua della Madonna di S. Anna, nei pressi del Cimitero del paese, la lava come per miracolo arrestò la sua corsa mettendo così in pace l'animo dei Boschesi. Quasi tutti erano convinti che il pericolo fosse ormai svanito, ed i più audaci che abitavano il rione Oratorio, che giustamente la mattina avevano lasciato per il pericolo che incombeva, ritornarono ai loro abitati riportandovi le masserizie.



Foto 12 e 13 - Due vedute della processione in onore di S. Anna fatta a Boscotrecase per chiedere patrocinio. Edite da Ettore Ragazzino (Na) nel 1906 dai lavori di Crocco e Scarfoglio del "Il Mattino".



Foto 14 e 15 - La processione con a capo S. Anna e, come si vede sulla foto a destra, Don Carmine Russo che porta la rozza croce di legno si avvia tra i valloni Boschesi per chiedere la fine del flagello. Le foto, al Bromuro, furono edite dalla Aletrocca di Terni nel 1906.

A mezzogiorno del 7 Aprile, dinanzi alla statua della Madonna di S. Anna, nei pressi del Cimitero del paese, la lava come per miracolo arrestò la sua corsa mettendo così in pace l'animo dei Boschesi. Quasi tutti erano convinti che il pericolo fosse ormai svanito, ed i più audaci che abitavano il rione Oratorio, che giustamente la mattina avevano lasciato per il pericolo che incombeva, ritornarono ai loro abitati riportandovi le masserizie. Durante la notte tra il giorno 7 e 8 Aprile una nuova bocca effimera si apre a quota 780 sopra la cittadina di Boscotrecase iniziando a vomitare un'altra colata lavica che soprappponendosi a quella del giorno precedente e rinvigorendo il suo fronte, fece ricredere i Boschesi dello scampato pericolo. Infatti il mattino dell'8 la colata nata durante la notte precedente si biforca in due rami di cui uno si indirizzò verso il Vallone S. Anna, e l'altro ramo si incuneò nel Vallone Izzo colmandolo per poi indirizzare la sua corsa verso il centro abitato minacciando la contrada Casavitelli. Intanto nel paese, accorsero in aiuto i soldati dell'8° Reggimento di Fanteria che con a capo il Duca d'Aosta in persona iniziarono a costruire ogni sorta di contromisura per arginare il fiume di lava che incombeva, ma fu tutto inutile.



Foto 16 - Fotografia edita dalla Alterocca di Terni in tecnica al Bromuro raffigurante l'approssimarsi al centro abitato di Boscotrecase delle lave.

Foto 17 - Edita dalla Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906, mostra le lave che si riversano nei valloni di Boscotrecase



Foto 18 e 19 - Due immagini edita da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906 e tratte dalle foto di Crocco e Scarfoglio del quotidiano "Il Mattino" mostrano la costruzione delle dighe contro la lava a protezione dei quartieri di Boscotrecase



Foto 20 e 21 - Altre due immagini dei lavori di arginazione del flusso di lava nei pressi di Boscotrecase capeggiati dal Duca d'Aosta in persona. Foto edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906 da lavori di Crocco e Scarfoglio del "Il Mattino" di Napoli.

Intanto il fronte lavico indirizzatosi verso il Vallone S. Anna non incontro nulla che poteva contrastarlo e arrivato alle porte del paese fece come prima vittima il Palazzo Bifulco per poi irrompere nella piazza di S. Anna circondando dapprima la chiesa della Santa patrona del paese, per poi distruggere il portone principale inoltrandosi fino all'altare, e non solo, la lava infuocata entrò nelle stanze della sacrestia incendiando le suppellettili e i libri dei battezzati per poi penetrare sotto le fondamenta della stessa invadendo il cimitero sottostante la chiesa colmandolo.

Foto 22 e 23 - Due immagini edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906 e tratte dalle foto di Crocco e Scarfoglio del quotidiano "Il Mattino" mostrano lo scempio da parte delle lave del palazzo Bifulco a Boscotrecase



Immagine 24 - Illustrazione cromolitografica di Coppola edita nel 1906 da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) raffigurante l'invasione della Piazza di S. Anna da parte della corrente infuocata

Foto 25 - Veduta di Piazza S. Anna dopo l'arrivo della colata lavica in un'edizione della Richter & Co. (Na) del 1906



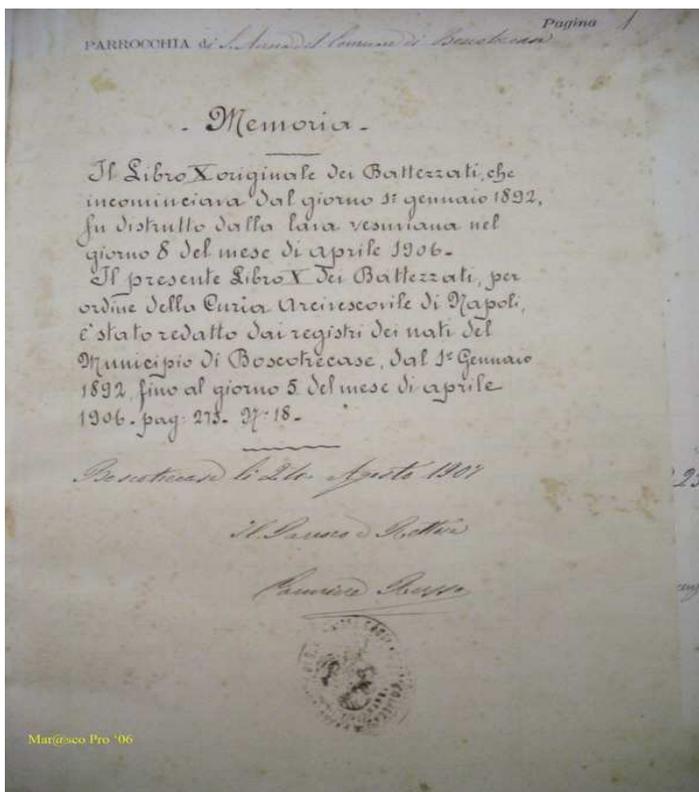
Foto 26 - Veduta della Piazza S. Anna edita da De Luca Gentile & Co. nel 1906 si notano le immense proporzioni della colata lavica.



Foto 27 - La lava tracima dopo aver invaso la Piazza in via Oratorio abbracciando la chiesa, immagine edita da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906



Foto 28 e 29 - Due immagini della Piazza S. Anna con la chiesa completamente circondata dalle lave, edita dalla Ettore Ragozzino (Na) dalle foto di Crocco e Scarfoglio del quotidiano "Il Mattino" nel 1906.



Img. 30 - Documento firmato da Don Carmine Russo, parroco dell'epoca, che attesta l'entrata in chiesa delle lave e la conseguente distruzione di alcune dei registri dei battezzati dell'epoca. Archivio storico parrocchia di S. Anna di Boscotrecase.

Il destino della chiesa di S. Anna fu segnato, ma questo non fermò il lento ed inesorabile cammino della colata lavica che puntava oramai sul quartiere Oratorio così minacciando anche Torre Annunziata. In questo caso non bisogna dimenticare il dramma degli sfollati, gli abitanti di Boscotrecase, ormai invasa, si prepararono ad abbandonare il paese, e lo stesso successe a Torre Annunziata gravemente minacciata dove gli abitanti con qualsiasi mezzo di fortuna iniziarono il loro esodo verso Castellammare di Stabia.



Foto 31 - La popolazione inizia l'esodo dalla città di Boscotrecase invasa dalle lave, l'immagine al Bromuro fu edita dalla Alterocca di Terni nel 1906.

Foto 32 - Un'altra foto dei fuggiaschi di Boscotrecase che cercavano scampo verso la linea della vesuviana che conduceva verso Torre Annunziata edita dalla Ettore Ragozzino (Na) tratta dalle foto di Crocco e Scarfoglio del "Il Mattino".

Le lave colmarono la Piazza continuando il loro inarrestabile cammino sul quartiere Oratorio per poi proseguire la loro corsa lungo la strada provinciale puntando in direzione di Torre Annunziata.



Foto 33 e 34 - Due immagini edite da A. Scarpettini (Roma) che mettono ben in evidenza l'agonia della cittadina di Boscotrecase.



Foto 35 e 36 - Quel che restava dei Palazzi di Boscotrecase che si trovavano sul cammino della lava. Immagini edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906



Foto 37 - La lava per le strade di Boscotrecase ritratta in un'immagine edita da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906.

Foto 38 - Gli edifici devastati di Boscotrecase dopo il passaggio del fronte lavico. Edita dalla Richter & Co. (Na) nel 1906.

## Torre Annunziata è gravemente minacciata

Il giorno 8, nella tarda mattinata, il fronte lavico dopo aver devastato la cittadina di Boscotrecase assumeva proporzioni gigantesche, anche se avanzava lentamente, con un fronte che misurava ben 500 metri.

Il fronte, uscito dall'abitato di Boscotrecase, poco più a valle sfiorò di poco il serbatoio sarnese dell'acquedotto di Torre Annunziata per poi biforcarsi. Una lingua continuò la sua corsa verso valle, mentre l'altra lingua si riversò nella sede ferroviaria distruggendo i binari della circumvesuviana. Le case che la colata principale incontrava sul suo cammino verso l'abitato di Torre Annunziata non ebbero nessuno scampo, dapprima circondandole per poi soverchiarle cadendo nell'ordine: più a valle del serbatoio sarnese la casa Rossi, poi a pochi metri venne investita già in località Torre Annunziata la fabbrica di asfalti Manzo che venne spazzata via.

Oramai le lave erano a pochi metri dal cimitero di Torre Annunziata.



Foto 41 e 42 - Le prime case di Torre Annunziata vengono inghiottite dalla lava, a destra la distruzione di casa Rossi poco sopra il cimitero. Edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906 da foto di Crocco e Scarfoglio del "Il Mattino".

Foto 39 e 40 - La maestranza del fronte lavico in discesa verso Torre Annunziata dopo aver distrutto Boscotrecase



Foto 43 e 44 - Le case giacciono circondate dalle lave e anche un pino viene sradicati dalla forza della colata. Foto Edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906

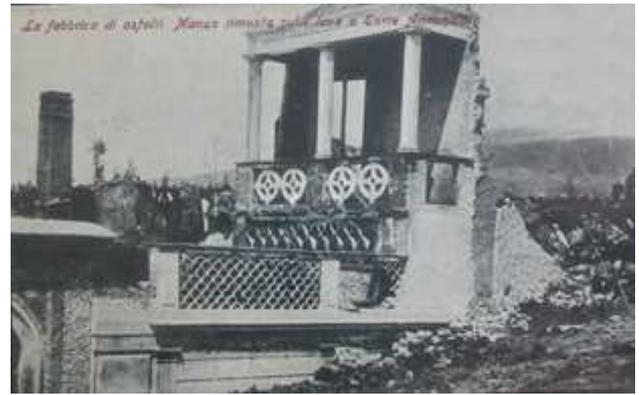


Foto 45 e 46 - L'agonia della fabbrica di asfalti Manzo alle porte di Torre nelle vicinanze del cimitero, la prima foto edita dalla Richter & Co. (Na) nel 1906, la seconda edita da Ettore Ragozzino nel 1906 dai lavori di Crocco e Scarfoglio del "Il Mattino".



Foto 47, 48, 49, 50 - Le lave sono alle porte del cimitero di Torre Annunziata. Foto edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906.

A questo punto anche il destino di Torre era segnato, in paese fin dal giorno precedente la gente era accorsa ad invocare il patrocinio della Madonna della Neve, la Santa patrona cittadina, che già in diverse occasioni aveva dato speranza ai torresi che la loro incolumità non venisse meno anche nei momenti più terribili.

. Allora la processione dei pochi torresi che ancora non erano scappati si mosse in direzione delle lave con in capo il parroco Don Agnello Prisco, trasportando l'immagine di Santa Maria della Neve nei pressi del cimitero. Il parroco iniziò ad invocare la grazia alla Santa Madre dicendogli:

*“Oh Maria se tu sei la vera vergine ferma questa brutta bestia e fa si che arretri la sua ira.”*

Ad un tratto si notò il deviamiento della colata, si alzò un urlo dalla folla: “Miracolo, miracolo!”. Ma non era finita, la lava anche se aveva fermato il suo corso sulla strada provinciale, continuava il suo corso inarrestabile verso Torre minacciando sempre più il cimitero, all'ora i cittadini come se inseguissero una bestia, riportarono l'immagine sacra sotto alla colata.

A 5 metri dal cimitero la lava si arrestò mentre più a nord, la lingua che si riversò nella sede ferroviaria, si gonfiava sollevandosi fino a sorpassare il terrapieno della Circumvesuviana che formava un potente ostacolo, scavalcato iniziò a correre giù per i Sannini distruggendo completamente tutto per una distanza di circa 500 metri. A questo punto, la popolazione imperterrita trasportarono l'immagine della Madonna della Neve ai piedi della seconda colata che non accennava a fermarsi quando alle 13:00 circa del giorno 8 Aprile, la lava si arrestò del tutto. L'emozione tra la folla fu tanta quando a “miracolo” avvenuto tutti gridarono in elogio alla sacra icona: “Evviva Maria.” Il pericolo per Torre da questo momento in poi era terminato.



*Una processione a Torre Anunziata la Domenica delle Palme quando sopravvenne il terrore.*

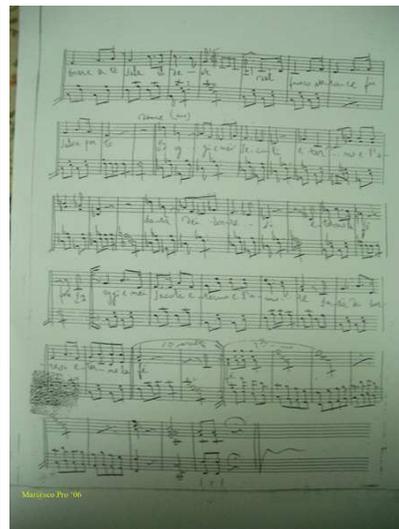
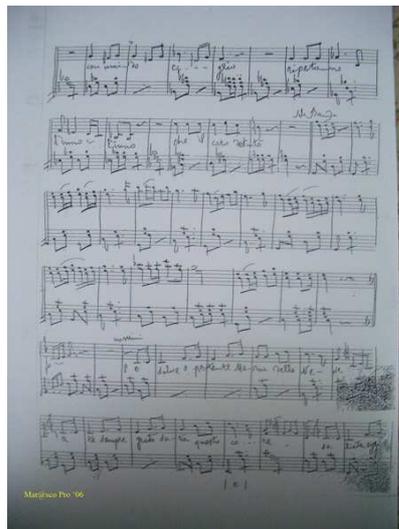
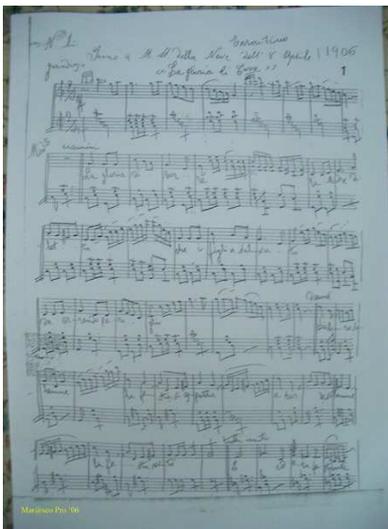


*Una processione a Torre Anunziata sotto la pioggia di cenere.*



*La processione della Madonna della Neve a Torre Anunziata fatta per lo scampato flagello.*

*Foto 51, 52 e 53 - Le processioni fatte a Torre Anunziata durante i giorni dell'eruzione per chiedere l'aiuto divino. Edite da Ettore Ragazzino nel 1906 da lavori di Crocco e Scarfoglio del "Il Mattino"*



Le tre pagine di spartiti dell'Inno cantato dalla popolazione di Torre Annunziata alla Madonna della Neve durante la processione dell'8 Aprile 1906. - Archivio storico Basilica Ave Gratia Plena di Torre Annunziata.



Foto 54, 55, 56 - Limiti dove si sono arrestate le lave a Torre Annunziata, le foto 54 e 56 edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) da lavori di Crocco e Scarfoglio del "Il Mattino", la 55 edita nel 1906 da A. Scarpettini di Roma.

### Ottajano e San Giuseppe d'Ottajano come Pompei

Se i paesi del versante Ovest del vulcano furono alle prese con la brutalità delle lave, cosa era accaduto ai paesi del versante Sud-Est fino a Nord-Est, del vulcano, i quali Terzigno, San Giuseppe d'Ottajano e Ottajano?

La loro sorte fu quella delle più terribili, tutta la furia distruttrice del vulcano, dopo quattro giorni di eruzione si abbattè con grande violenza sui paesi sopra citati scatenando su di essi un terribile diluvio di massi infuocati, lapilli e ceneri scure, scagliati da altezza che variava dagli 8000 fino ai 20000 metri dall'enorme nube che si formò sul vulcano il giorno 8 sera e che sospinta dai venti di ponente raggiunse le coste del Montenegro. Il giorno 9 l'ira del vulcano raggiunse l'apice, seppellendo completamente i paesi di Ottajano, Terzigno e San Giuseppe, dove rimasero in paese a fare da guardia a ciò che restava delle povere case, solo i soldati della 41° e 12° fanteria della Brigata Casale mandati dal Re in soccorso delle popolazioni.



Foto 57 e 58 - Due foto raffiguranti i paesi di Terzigno e Ottajano sotto le ceneri. Edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906



Foto 59 e 60 - Gli accampamenti militari impegnati nelle zone disastrose di Ottajano, San Giuseppe d'Ottajano e Terzigno. Edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906.



Foto 61 e 62 - Il Dramma della popolazione nel comune di Ottajano. Edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906



Foto 63, 64, 65 e 66 - Ottajano oramai giaceva sepolta sotto il lapillo e le ceneri. Edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906.

La situazione, come ad Ottajano, a San Giuseppe d'Ottajano divenne critica. Il livello dei detriti aumentava di ora in ora e altrettanto il loro peso sulle misere case del paese causando il crollo della maggior parte delle abitazioni cittadine seppellendone sotto i detriti gli abitanti rimasti nelle loro case per cercare rifugio.



Foto 67, 68, 69 - Alcune delle case crollate a San Giuseppe d'Ottajano, nella foto 69 si possono notare alcune vittime dovute al crollo dello stabile. Edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906.

E purtroppo a San Giuseppe d'Ottajano arrivò una tragedia dalle proporzioni spaventose. La mattina del giorno 8, Domenica delle Palme, la popolazione spaventata dai continui ruggiti del mostro infuocato che non accennava a placare la sua ira verso quel paese che duramente stava mettendo alla prova, si rifugiarono per chiedere patrocinio nella chiesa cittadina parrocchiale di S. Giuseppe dove il parroco Don Giuseppe D'Ambrosio volle celebrare la santa messa esponendo la Statua di S. Antonio per invocare il miracolo, quando ad un tratto la parte sommitale della vecchia costruzione, sotto alla terribile pressione dei materiali accumulati su di essa, crollò seppellendo più di 100 persone sotto le macerie. La tragedia fu terribile, della chiesa rimase in piedi solo la facciata principale, e nel crollo perirono 110 persone delle circa 200 presenti nella chiesa, per la popolazione locale il dramma fu totale visto che l'eruzione non accennava a diminuire d'intensità. Ancora una volta i soldati presenti in zona per apportare aiuti alle popolazioni colpite dal flagello diedero man forte per le opere di disseppellimento dei corpi rimasti intrappolati sotto le macerie della chiesa e sussistenza alla popolazione che oramai era arrivata all'esasperazione.



Foto 70, 71 e 72 - Le immagini della tragedia della chiesa di San Giuseppe d'Ottajano con i soldati intenti a dare man forte per disseppellire i cadaveri ancora sotto le macerie.



Foto 73 e 74 - Le macabre immagini dei cadaveri di San Giuseppe d'Ottajano estratti dalle macerie della chiesa crollata. La foto 73 al bromuro edita dalla NPG, la 74 da Ettore Ragazzino (Na) nel 1906.

### L'evento eruttivo diventa attrazione per i turisti

L'evento del secolo divenne subito un attrazione da non perdere per la bella borghesia sia italiana che straniera che in quegli anni, quella della bella "epoche", frequentava i locali di Napoli.

La voce passava da bocca a bocca che il Vesuvio stava per seppellire per sempre l'abitato di Boscotrecase con le sue igne lave, e questo era un evento da non perdere.

La gente interessata a lasciare una propria firma su qualche foglio di carta da spedire e dire "lì c'ero" si muoveva come poteva per raggiungere i luoghi interessati, per lo più si avvalevano della moderna linea della Circumvesuviana che da Napoli avvolgeva tutti i paesi del vesuviano.

A Boscotrecase, durante la processione di S. Anna, il giorno 7 Aprile, non manco l'occhio attento dei primi curiosi napoletani e non accorsi sul posto per deporre una moneta nella lava incandescente in segno di ricordo o portare a casa un pezzo di essa per farla vedere ai parenti.

E non solo, tra questi tra i vari paesi c'era chi raccoglieva pezzi di lava ancora calda per souvenir, chi posava tra le misere macerie delle povere case abbattute dalle ceneri vulcaniche e chi per l'occasione sforgiava i fastosi vestiti dell'epoca mettendo ancor più in evidenza quel muro che divideva la miseria ancor più evidenziata dall'evento della maggior parte dei cittadini delle varie località colpite dal flagello con lo sfarzo della classe borghese dell'epoca. Anche questo evento di controtendenza venne immortalato dai vari fotografi dell'epoca che si aggiravano tra le zone devastate.



Foto 75 e 76 - I turisti facevano a gara per raggiungere le lave e portare via qualche souvenir. Foto edita da Ettore Ragazzino (Na) 1906.



Foto 77 e 78 - Foto dei turisti sulle lave a Boscotrecase e tra le macerie delle case distrutte di Ottajano.

### L'eruzione si esaurisce lasciando segni incancellabili

Il giorno 12 Aprile finalmente l'intensità dell'eruzione iniziava a diminuire e nei paesi colpiti si organizzarono subito processioni in onore dei rispettivi Santi patroni per la cessazione del flagello.

A Torre Annunziata, giorno 15 Aprile, Santa Pasqua, una processione si mosse sotto il cielo ancora caliginoso in onore di Santa Maria della Neve che fu ricondotta dove pochi giorni prima avvenne il formidabile prodigio e dove si tenne una cerimonia religiosa con più di 20.000 partecipanti.

Il giorno 21, benché si manifestavano ancora deboli fenomeni stromboliani, l'eruzione si considerò conclusa. Il Vesuvio ora appariva agli occhi di chi lo ammirava assai diverso da come si presentava circa 20 giorni addietro, infatti alcuni studiosi poterono fare la seguente stima: la parte a est del cratere aveva perso circa 250 metri passando ad un'altezza di circa 1.105 metri, mentre la parte a ovest perse circa 135 metri, passando ad un'altezza di circa 1.100 metri. In oltre il cratere si presentò come un enorme voragine raggiungendo in alcuni punti una profondità di circa 600 metri e un diametro alla bocca di circa 700 metri (secondo Fiechter I.G.M.).

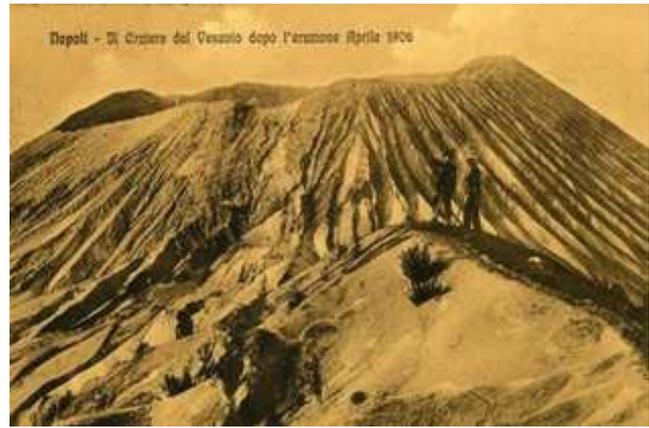


Foto 79 - F.A. Perret 1906 - Foto del Gran Cono a eruzione terminata

Foto 80 - Veduta del Gran Cono dopo l'eruzione in una foto edita da Alterocca di Terni nel 1906

Tutte le popolazioni colpite dall'evento furono inserite in un piano di aiuto coordinato da un Comitato Centrale di Soccorso presieduto da S.A.R. il Duca d'Aosta. Il comitato compilò una relazione in cui si riportavano i danni subiti dalle popolazioni sia in vite umane che in beni materiali onde creare una situazione completa dell'accaduto e sugli interventi futuri da effettuare.

Dalla relazione, redatta a Portici nel 1908, e riportata poi, in parte, dalla raccolta di documenti eseguita da Angelandrea Casale e Angelo Bianco (Boscotrecase 1981) in onore del 75° anniversario dell'eruzione in "Boscotrecase e l'eruzione del 1906 pag. 39, si trassero le seguenti conclusioni:

Dal comitato furono raccolte 3.626.655,30 lire di cui lire 2.656.051,52 provenienti dal Regno d'Italia, 970.603,78 lire come proventi degli aiuti esteri comprese 439.365,40 ricavate dalle sottoscrizioni delle colonie italiane.

Provvedimenti per lo sgombero delle strade:

Boscotrecase: In questo comune, per ristabilire le vie interdetteste dalla lava, occorrevano opere di carattere ben diverso, che non il semplice sgombero della cenere e del lapillo. Si trattava di ripristinare il transito nelle strade coperte e di mettere specialmente in comunicazione il detto comune e quello di Boscoreale con Torre Annunziata. Ciò si rendeva maggiormente necessario a causa dell'interruzione della linea ferroviaria della Circumvesuviana. Nei giorni che seguirono immediatamente il disastro, furono adibite le truppe colà distaccate per aprire le vie principali di comunicazione; di poi si provvide nei modi ordinari.

I lavori furono eseguiti in economia dal comune, sotto la sorveglianza tecnica del Genio Civile e si riuscì a provvedervi con la spesa di Lire 45.807,37.



Foto 81 - La vastità della colata lavica che ha ricoperto la cittadine di Boscotrecase e come si presentava a eruzione finita. Edita dalla Richter e Co. nel 1906.

Foto 82 - La ferrovia Circumvesuviana interrotta dalle lave.



Foto 83 e 84 - L'instancabile lavoro dei soldati dell'8° Reggimento di Fanteria per sgomberare le strade di Boscotrecase dai detriti lavici e per la restabilizzazione dei collegamenti con Torre Annunziata.

In oltre il comitato si preoccupò della distribuzione dei viveri di prima necessità nei comuni colpiti e la costituzione di cucine provvisorie dove si poteva sfamare la popolazione. Furono distribuiti razioni di ogni conforto, e con l'entrata in vigore della legge del 19 Luglio 1906 n. 390, si iniziarono a stanziare i fondi di sovvenzione per i Comuni danneggiati, assistenza ai profughi e alle aziende che avevano avuto danni irreparabili.



Foto 85 - I profughi di Ottajano fanno ritorno al paese

In merito ogni ente statale si mobilitò per dare man forte, il caso di Boscotrecase, dove il Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia si accollò la spesa di Lire 4.542,19 per effettuare i restauri alla chiesa gravemente danneggiata della Madonna di S. Anna.

Il comitato apportò i sussidi dovuti non solo ai proprietari delle industrie danneggiate o distrutte, ma ebbero spazio anche i proprietari terrieri gravemente colpiti dalle colate laviche, le famiglie delle vittime e dei feriti.



Foto 86 e 87 - I lavori di sgombero delle vie di comunicazione presso Ottajano. Foto edite da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906.



Foto 88 - Veduta di ciò che rimane dello Stabilimento Galliano presso Ottajano in una foto edita da Ettore Ragozzino (Na) nel 1906

A eruzione finita, il comitato si preoccupò di tirare un totale dei feriti e delle vittime conseguite durante il flagello così ripartiti nei comuni interessati:

S. Giuseppe d'Ottajano:	62 feriti	125 vittime;
Ottajano:	40 feriti	78 vittime;
Boscotrecase:	1 ferito (Capaldi Michela di anni 82)	3 vittime (Di Martino Carmine di anni 80, Panariello Giovanni di anni 77 e Russo Colomba di anni 74);
Torre del Greco:	2 feriti	2 vittime;
Somma Vesuviana:	1 ferito	2 vittime;
S. Gennaro di Palma:	1 ferito	2 vittime;
Resina:		2 vittime;
Nola (Piazzola):	2 feriti	1 vittima;
Saviano:	2 feriti	1 vittima;
S. Giovanni a Teduccio:	1 ferito;	

**Per un totale complessivo di ben 216 vittime e 112 feriti**

## Gli eroi e il dovere

Di Vincenzo Marasco

Non era possibile finire una così lunga storia fatta di tante immagini che rispecchiano le tragedie e le vicissitudini di quella che fu la grande eruzione del 1906 senza dedicare almeno una pagina e giustamente qualche immagine a chi si prodigò all'epoca e fece alto il senso del dovere senza indugiare sulle proprie azioni. Voglio rammentare il nome del Professor Matteucci, all'epoca direttore dell'Osservatorio Vesuviano che non si distolse neanche un attimo dal suo posto durante tutta la durata dell'eruzione tenendo sempre il suo sguardo attento vigile sugli strumenti rudimentali dell'epoca che durante il fenomeno erano in continuo fervore. E proprio lui la mattina del 6 Aprile telegrafò per primo il Re tenendolo in continuo aggiornamento sull'evolversi della situazione.

Non solo, il Matteucci, insieme all'Ingegnere americano Perret scortati dai sei carabinieri, che presidiavano l'Osservatorio, misero in salvo parecchie persone che si avventurarono tra le pendici del Vesuvio in eruzione e tra questi un bambino che si era perso a causa della scarsa visibilità, dovuto alla caduta delle ceneri, nei vigneti sotto-



Foto 89 e 90 - Gli eroi del dovere, gli uomini che presidiarono per tutta l'eruzione il Regio Osservatorio. Le foto furono edite dalla Alterocca di Terni nel 1906.

stanti l'Osservatorio.

In fine è doveroso ricordare l'incessante lavoro di tutti i soldati che intervennero sui luoghi sciagurati apportando grandi aiuti e forza lavoro per ristabilizzare una situazione che diventò per le popolazioni locali di grande sofferenza.

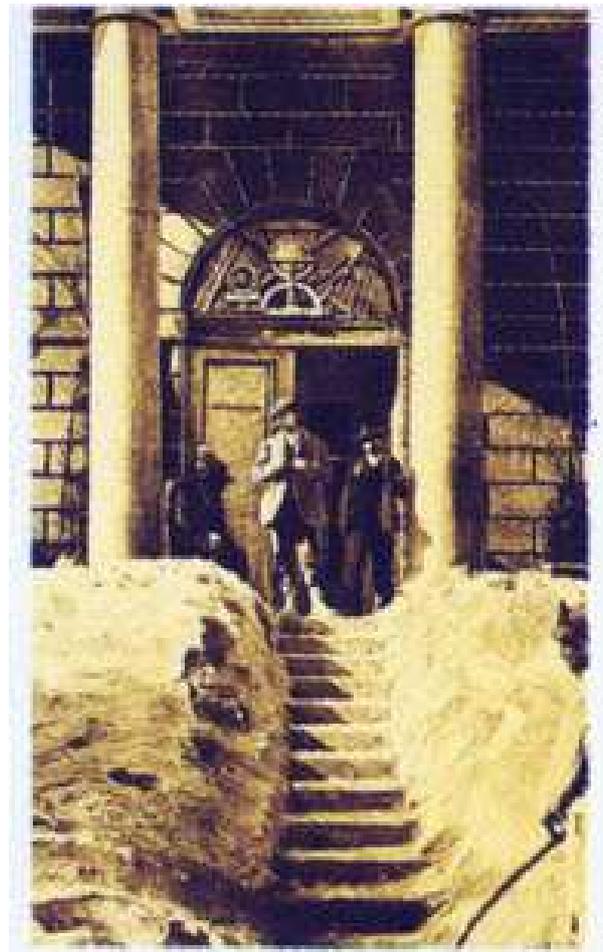


Foto 91 - Veduta del cratere dall'Osservatorio. Foto edita dalla Alterocca di Terni 1906

Foto 92 - Foto dell'Osservatorio con la figura del Matteucci sulle scale di Frank Perret. Notasi lo spessore dei prodotti da caduta.

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