Eyewitnesses

Di **Tom Gidwitz**

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.

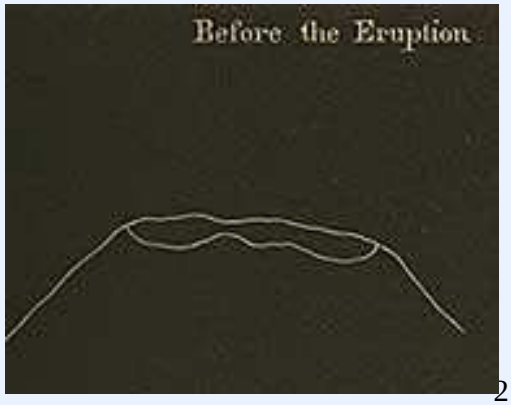
The Death of PlinyPliny was residing at Misenum, a point of land across the Bay from the volcano, at the villa of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, a prolific scholar and commander of the fleet of the Bay of Naples. As the eruption cloud shot into the sky it showered ash on the towns across the water, and 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 HamiltonIn 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.”

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