

Vesuvius - A Biography by Alwyn Scarth.  
Princeton University Press 2009.

For those of us whose previous knowledge of Italy's most famous volcano was restricted to its role in the destruction of the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79 CE, this biography comes as a revelation.

Alwyn Scarth, author of several books on volcanoes and their destructive power, tells the story of what he describes as 'one of the most violent and destructive volcanoes in the world' in the minutest detail.

Vesuvius is divided into twelve sections with an introduction and two appendices, tracing the mountain's history from Bronze Age times through to the present day. In spite of the fact that the eruption during the reign of the Emperor Titus is Vesuvius' principle claim to fame in the world at large, Scarth details the eruption and creation of a new mountain in 1538, named Monte Nuovo, which severely destabilised the town of Pozzuoli and was extensively written about by Renaissance scholars. In 1631 Vesuvius again erupted, causing earthquakes in Naples, rocking the Campania region and creating the worst volcanic disaster Europe had seen for a thousand years. Other eruptions, albeit not on quite the same scale, occurred during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and there was a significant eruption in 1944, photographed by members of the Royal Air Force.

Alwyn Scarth ends this fascinating book with a chapter entitled The Future: The Eruption to be Avoided, detailing the many challenges that face the authorities and the contingency plans that have already been made. In his view some 500,000 people are now at risk from a major eruption, and it is likely that the longer the time between eruptions the greater the next one will be when it comes. For Scarth the next eruption of Vesuvius 'would cause an unprecedented volcanic catastrophe' - we must hope that the mountain sleeps on for many decades to come.

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