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Volcanoes in their full glory at the height of an eruption seem more a life force than one of inanimate nature. The temperamental monster Vesuvius, on the east side of the Bay of Naples, well deserves this lively and generously illustrated account of its past 2,000 years. Scarth (Savage Earth) gives detailed accounts of each of the volcano's known eruptions, including the possible geological causes, remarkably precise (considering the large historical distance) analysis of lava and pyroclastic flow patterns, and the aftermath. Scarth discloses that the cone we call Vesuvius wasn't the mountain that buried Herculaneum and Pompeii; that mountain constantly rebuilt itself over the millennia. And more strangely, Vesuvius the destroyer is also Vesuvius the nurturer, as the lava and ash from each eruption eventually became fertile soil. Scarth also tells the fascinating story of Sir William Hamilton, famously cuckolded by his wife, Emma, and Lord Nelson. Hamilton left a more noble legacy: through his studies of Vesuvius, he established the science of volcanology. Readers interested in the earth sciences, antiquity or just a good read will find Scarth's book hard to put down. 101 b&w illus. (Sept.)

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