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The lost Etna of Wiltshire

A mysterious painting, an extraordinary feat lost in time: an Italian book shed light on the first British expedition on the top of the Sicilian volcano in June 1766



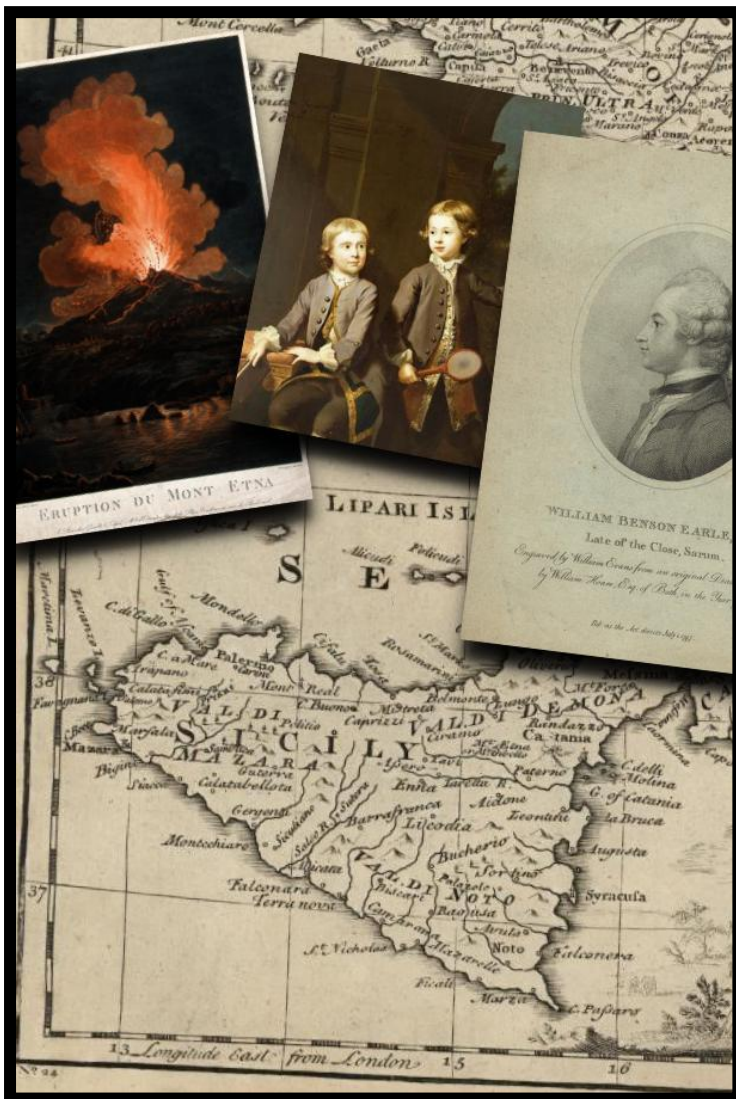
Three gentlemen with a Master of Art at Oxford, good manners, taste for letters and the polite arts: you would not bet a penny on them to venture into the unknown, sail to a distant Island and climb a volcano three miles high, straight to the top, while spewing fire and flame. And yet, William Benson Earle (1740-1796) and Henry Penruddocke Wyndham (1736-1819) from Salisbury, together with Sir Thomas Worsley of Pylewell (1726-1768), were protagonists of such a daredevil exploit. Today *Il vulcano di Enea*, a book by Italian architect Gabriele Mulè, unravels the untold story of the first (so far) British expedition that conquered the top of Etna during a major eruption, in June 1766. A story lost in time, whose secret key remained hidden on the back of an Eighteenth-century painting by Coplestone Warre Bampfylde (1720-1791).



Coplestone Warre Bampfylde, *View of a great eruption on mount Etna, 1768 (?)*, Private Collection. ©Bruce Ginsberg

A mystery behind a painting. Now part of a private collection, the painting represents a stunning volcanic landscape: three exploding craters boiling over rivers and fountains of lava, ejecting pillars of black smoke and red-hot masses to the height of hundreds of feet. On the back, someone wrote down: "*View of a great eruption on the south side of Mount Etna in Sicily, taken on the spot on the night of 19th June 1766*". Bampfylde never made a Grand Tour and Mulè, a researcher of landscape history and British travelers, was asked by Philip White (chief executive of Hestercombe Gardens Trust) to investigate about the men who *took on the spot* witness of the eruption. Letters, travel diaries, watercolors: in the last five years Mulè explored archives from Los Angeles to Cape Town, from Hampshire to Lincolnshire, collecting every single

detail of the Grand Tour accomplished by Earle, Wyndham and Worsley: an adventurous spiritual and scientific journey, seven weeks lasting, along the shores of Sicily.



Three unexpected explorers. William Benson Earle and Henry Pen Wyndham, exponents of two wealthy families of Salisbury, set sail from Dover in September 1765. They planned to visit Italy and its most famous cities, Genoa, Pisa, Florence, Venice. The crowning glory of their tour would have been the visit of the ancient remains of Rome and, finally, Naples, the southernmost destination for the majority of *viaggiatori inglesi*. They were not prepared to be welcomed, at the beginning of March 1766, by an eruption of Vesuvius. Volcanoes were source of potent cultural tensions between rationality and wonder, and Vesuvius exerted on them a mysterious and dark fascination. So, when news arrived of a great eruption on Etna, they had no hesitations. Together with Sir Thomas Worsley, they would have tackled south, towards Sicily, "*an unknown, faraway and mysterious land*", menaced by bandits and

African pirates, with no certainties of finding shelter: and all to climb Etna and then sail along the Island following the route of Enea, the mythological Virgilian hero, visiting Taormina, Siracusa, Agrigento, Selinunte, where enormous Greek temples fell in ruin surrounded by a seamless garden of exotic plants and flowers. Earle, Wyndham and Worsley, followed step by step a centuries-old climbing technique to reach the summit of the volcano, through cultivated countryside with large and lofty aloes in full bloom, a wood of enormous chestnuts and oaks surrounded by hundreds of ancient volcanic cones and, finally, the bare extension of cinders and snow near the summit. And then, at the cost of a sleepless night at an altitude of 2.200 meters, agitated by explosions, risking their lives, the three gentlemen contemplated for hours rivers and fountains of lava, raptured by hundreds of lapilli appearing *like large, numberless stars*. A series of watercolors by Sir Thomas Worsley, held at Lincolnshire Archives, offers the opportunity to explore many iconic Eighteenth-century Sicilian landscapes, from Etna to the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento.

In balance between myth and reality, narrative style and historical research, *Il vulcano di Enea* reveals how to put in practice an extraordinary Grand Tour, a fascinating journey of discovery towards scientific, philosophic and aesthetic frontiers. And tells how three gentleman with Master of Art at Oxford, good manners, taste for letters and the polite arts, pursued the beauty of Nature in one of its most majestic and uncontrollable manifestation.

Author biography. Gabriele Mulè is an Italian architect. His fields of research are Garden and Landscape History, Grand Tour and British travellers. By his investigations into Eighteenth century British travellers in Sicily, Mulè has revealed a fascinating new area of academic study which can only benefit the wider study of the development of British cultural life. Furthermore, the results of these researches might never have been revealed except through the medium of an Italian historian.

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