

Captivating volume follows true tale of isle volcanologist

"The Last Volcano: A Man, a Romance, and the Quest to Understand Nature's Most Magnificent Fury"

John Dvorak
Pegasus Books, \$28.95

Review by Misty-Lynn Sanico

Special to the Star-Advertiser

Geologist and science writer John Dvorak has a talent for marrying scholarship with storytelling. His new book, "The Last Volcano," which follows his well-received "Earthquake Storms," has all the elements of a captivating tale: A protagonist changed by devastating events embarks on a quest to make a difference, facing danger and adversity, love and loss. The story also happens to be true, recounting the adventures of Thomas A. Jaggar, who would play a significant role in natural sciences and Hawaii history.

"The Last Volcano" takes a comprehensive look at the

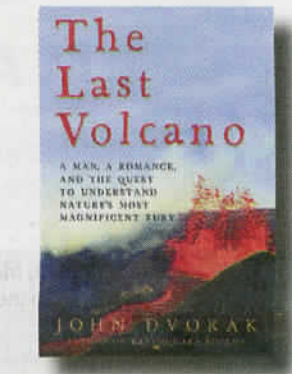
early scientific study of volcanoes and the foundations of our modern understanding of seismology and volcanology through the life of the man who pioneered the field. The museum in Hawaii's Volcanoes National Park is named for him.

The early chapters of the biography trace Jaggar's years as a young geologist. Drawn to the Caribbean after the explosion of Mount Pelee in 1902, he was one of the first and only scientists to investigate the eruption that killed more than 26,000. After witnessing the devastating results of this "small" eruption, Jaggar would sacrifice his personal life and career for a mission of seeking to learn why volcanoes erupt and how they can be predicted. His dedication took him to eruptions in Italy, Alaska, Central America, Japan and the Pacific; these are briefly covered.

But a larger portion of the book concentrates on Jag-

gar's life and accomplishments in Hawaii, where he would make his most significant discoveries. Despite initial challenges and criticism from colleagues and leading science institutions like MIT, Jaggar was adamant that Kilauea presented a unique opportunity to learn and document volcanic activity. So he founded Hawaii's first volcanic observatory — a small station set up on the rim of Halemaumau Crater — without institutional backing or a steady paycheck.

Eight pages of photographs include one of Jaggar and Honolulu businessman Lorrie A. Thurston, who helped raise funds to form the Hawaii Volcano Research Association and back the small observatory, which became the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory in 1912. Over the years, the observatory had seismometers installed in Hilo and Kona that could detect the approximate location of



large and distant earthquakes, enabling scientists to form the fundamentals of tsunami prediction.

Jaggar was a prolific writer with papers published in many scientific journals and magazines, as well as two memoirs. Using these and a variety of other primary sources, "The Last Volcano" is a superbly researched and well-crafted science history narrative. Dvorak, who lives in Hawaii and operates a telescope at Mauna Kea, explains scientific concepts and issues in language that the leisurely reader can comprehend. Combined with anecdotes and myths, as well as the author's own knowledge and insight, "The Last Volcano" is a compelling read that educates and entertains.