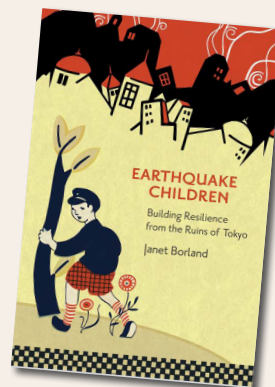


BOOK REVIEW

Earthquake Children: Building Resilience from the Ruins of Tokyo

By Janet Borland

Harvard University Asia Center, 2020
352 pages.



Reviewed by Julia GERSTER

Janet Borland's *Earthquake Children: Building Resilience from the Ruins of Tokyo* explores the destruction caused by the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake and the city's subsequent recovery from the unique perspective of the children themselves. Packing well-researched details into the engaging stories of individuals, Borland describes how the response to this catastrophe propelled Japan from being "an earthquake nation" (p. 2), frequently subject to disaster, to one of the countries best-prepared to resist them. Borland also challenges images of the Japanese that have spread worldwide in the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake, showing that a calm and coordinated disaster response is not a national characteristic, but a skill that can be learned and taught.

The book consists of an introduction, seven chapters, and an epilogue. Each chapter focuses on the experiences of children in Tokyo, along with their families and teachers, schools and neighborhoods. The first chapter gives the reader the background information necessary to imagine life in crowded 1920s Tokyo, and explores how experts evaluated disaster risk at that time and why the earthquake led to such a large-scale disaster. Most of the insights presented in subsequent chapters are based on essays and drawings by children. Chapter 2 describes how children experienced and coped with the direct impact of the earthquake and the fires that turned their city into "hell on earth." The primary sources the author deploys reveal the chaos and violence that occurred after the earthquake and the extent to which children were aware of what was happening around them. The third chapter highlights children's struggle for survival in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. It shows that support for Tokyo's young people was prioritized because their "innocent or pitiful" (p. 78) stories were widely featured in the press. Nevertheless, Borland, drawing on school essays, demonstrates that many children suffered in the post-disaster period. A girl in fourth grade, for instance, confessed that she could barely eat the rice provided to her family, as, "The brown rice felt rough, it tasted strange and smelled bad. It was horrible to eat. How miserable!" (p. 81). Quotes like this help the reader understand that it was not only the loss of homes and loved ones, but also changes in everyday life that affected the youngest residents of Tokyo.

While chapter 3 emphasizes the stories of vulnerable children as helping to secure disaster relief, chapter 4 focuses on their role as "Objects of Investigation and Agents of Recovery." Borland argues that it was expert recognition in 1923 of the vulnerability

of children that signaled the emergence of modern theories of resilience. The deaths of vulnerable people in the chaos and fires after the earthquake helped complicate the assumption that such disasters were a purely natural occurrence. Disasters were increasingly understood as the outcomes of natural hazards intersecting with vulnerable populations. Experts concluded that people needed to learn how to behave if an earthquake occurred, remaining calm and extinguishing sources of fire before evacuating. Therefore, society “could reduce the destructive effects ... through education and infrastructure” (p. 107). Children were not just passive objects of investigation but also contributed to the knowledge experts acquired. Children recorded how they coped with the disaster through pictures and essays, contributing significantly to the understanding of mental health and what is nowadays known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Their essays revealed their resilience, and how they imagined their future in a Tokyo rebuilt to withstand natural hazards.

Chapter 5 centers on the efforts of the “earthquake teachers.” Borland explores their hardships, their losses, their searches for surviving pupils, and their role in school reconstruction. Schools, it emerges, were poorly prepared for earthquakes and other hazards, and only a few of them possessed emergency plans. Chapters 6 and 7 build on this point to explore how lessons learned from the disaster were finally implemented in the curriculum, positioning schools at the center of modern Japanese disaster preparedness. The fears of seismologists that the disaster could be forgotten, and the search for ways to ensure that it was not, show striking similarities to discussions being held today as a result of the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake. The final chapter stresses that newly built schools and parks were “certainly the high point of an otherwise disappointing reconstruction” (p. 243). Children living elsewhere in the Kanto region often envied the children of Tokyo for their safe schools, but the buildings did not last as long as their architects intended as many were destroyed in the air raids of 1945.

Finally, the epilogue connects the stories of 1923 to more recent disasters, such as the 1995 Great Hanshin Awaji earthquake and the 2011 triple disasters. Borland argues that it was not one disaster that transformed Japan into the resilient nation we know today, as disaster preparedness is a dynamic process always in need of reflection (p. 252). However, she asserts that since 1923, “children, safe schools, drills, and disaster education have remained a fundamental component of efforts to build resilience in local communities” (p. 253).

With *Earthquake Children*, Janet Borland delivers a fascinating account of the devastating Great Kanto earthquake, the long road to recovery, and the earthquake’s influence on disaster studies and preparedness. The book engages the reader through the stories of individuals, and focuses on the vivid descriptions provided by children. Borland emphasizes the importance of children’s accounts, a vital contribution given that children’s experiences of disaster remain understudied. Her account of 1923 reveals many similarities with modern disaster responses. If there is a shortcoming, it is also a strength, which is the book’s reliance primarily on children’s testimonies. The book offers one of the most detailed descriptions available in English of the Great Kanto earthquake, but reliance on these sources restricts critical examination of one of the darkest aspects of the 1923 disaster, the massacre of Koreans by vigilante groups. While children witnessed the violence, many of them recorded only wild rumors. Nevertheless, Janet Borland’s book is highly recommended for researchers of disasters, memory and trauma, those examining the history of children and childhood, and anyone interested in the history of Japan’s disaster preparedness.