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## [Janet Hunter](#)

**Book review: Alex Bates: The Culture of the Quake: the Great Kantō Earthquake and Taishō Japan. (Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies 78.) viii, 220 pp. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2015. \$25. ISBN 9781929280865.**

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ALEX BATES:

*The Culture of the Quake: the Great Kantō Earthquake and Taisho Japan.*

(Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies no.78). viii, 220 pp. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2015. £??.

ISBN 9781929280865

Alex Bates' monograph on literary representations of Japan's Great Kantō Earthquake of September 1923 is a welcome addition to recent scholarly works on natural disasters in Japan, and on the Kantō earthquake in particular.<sup>1</sup> This was a natural disaster that, as Bates notes, 'struck the political, economic, and cultural heart of an empire' (p.12), but its effects were far from evenly distributed, being strongly influenced by what the author terms a geography of vulnerability, in which factors such as class, location, ethnicity and ideology rendered the impact more or less powerful. Bates' objective is to look at the representation of the disaster through three particular nodes. The first is through what is termed 'high literature', when individual authors were forced to confront the post-disaster world; the second focus is on popular representations and melodrama; and the third focus is class and ethnic divisions that called into question the concept of national homogeneity.

In line with these objectives chapter 1 offers an overview of what can be called 'earthquake culture', noting the importance of Tokyo as the centre of print culture and the immediate physical obstacles to publication imposed by the disaster. Chapters 2 and 3 move on to consider high literature after the quake, in which almost all members of the literary establishment (*bundan*) escaped from the worst effects. The disaster, argues Bates, stimulated a discourse regarding the extent to

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Gregory Smits, *When the Earth Roars: Lessons from the History of Earthquakes in Japan* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Gennifer S. Weisenfeld, *Imaging Disaster: Tokyo and the Visual Culture of Japan's Great Earthquake of 1923* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2012); Charles J.Schenking, *The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

which literature should be more socially aware. It did not prevent many of these establishment authors from continuing to focus on themselves and their experiences, but pushed further a gradual decline in the previous dominance of the I-novel (*watakushi shōsetsu*). The discussion focusses in particular on the writings on the disaster of Tayama Katai, often thought of as the father of the I-novel, whose *Record of the Tokyo Earthquake (Taishō Daishinsai Kasai Shi)* is probably the best known such account by any member of the *bundan*. The *Record* combined subjective observations, elements of a travelogue and a degree of popular empathy.

The next three chapters move on to consider melodramatic and fictional accounts of the disaster. Building on the existing tradition of *jitsuwa* (true stories), many popular accounts came with a moral message, highlighting the praiseworthy and selfless actions of some of those involved, and on occasions blurring fact and fiction. A number of emotional and emotive films were produced, though sadly none are still extant. Chapters 5 and 6 look at two particular artists' response to suffering. Masamune Hakuchō's 'Suffering of Another' (*Tanin no Saigai*) was opposed to melodrama while acknowledging the existence of broader suffering, and Bates also offer us an extended discussion of Nagata Mikihiko's film *Wild Dance of the Flames (Honoo no Ranbu)*, which articulated a class-based survivor anxiety. Chapter 7 looks at the concept of divine retribution (*tenken*), and the idea found across the globe that natural disaster is a punishment for the moral failings of society. Some writers and film makers drew on this idea in calling for a return to more moral ways, while others strongly opposed the idea on the grounds of anti-scientific rationality and the random allocation of suffering.

The final two chapters look at how writers responded to the massacre of Koreans. The rumours about Koreans and the massacre that followed faced many

writers with a dilemma. Stories based on rumours could be dramatized, while critiques could make use of allegory in the face of censorship. Writers such as Ema Shū were caught between their friendships with Koreans and whether or not to believe the rumours. Proletarian writers had to address proletarian involvement in the massacre and locate what had happened in the context of their critique of the capitalist state. The book's conclusion seeks to summarise the state of Japanese literature following the disaster, putting it into its longer term trajectory. The author concludes that the disaster can be identified with a literary shift towards modernism, but that the causal relationship associated with this shift is a very difficult one to establish. Kawabata Yasunari's *Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (*Asakusa Kurenaidan*) of 1930 is highlighted as incorporating many of the literary trends prominent after the 1923 earthquake, but, as Bates points out, these trends were relatively short lived, lasting only to the late 1930s when literary production was forced to move in new directions.

Alex Bates has produced a readable and accessible work. By taking specific examples from a range of writers we are able to get closer to the emotions and responses of specific groups, and understand better how they in turn produced works that fed back into both elite and popular conceptions of the disaster and what it meant for Japan. Bates' argument that these cultural products demonstrate the contested nature of the national community at the time is also a welcome reminder that Japan's often touted national homogeneity and unity has never been a complete reality. Literary and artistic representations are, of course, only one set of responses to the disaster, albeit an important one. We still know too little about how these representations came together with those articulated by other groups in society, including women, those living in the provinces and less directly affected, or experts

and practitioners in other areas of economic and social activity, to produce a composite response that goes beyond any influence on the literary canon. However, Alex Bates has gone a considerable way towards filling one of these gaps, and this book will be of considerable interest not only to literature specialists, but also to those more broadly interested in disasters and how they impact on, and are portrayed by, the individuals and societies that are caught up in them.

Janet Hunter

London School of Economics and Political Science