Book Review


When you open this book – and you should – do not skip the Acknowledgements section. On the first page, Borland tells us that she lived through the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995 when she was a high school exchange student. It is only a few lines but knowing this personal interest and journey makes reading *Earthquake Children* a profoundly meaningful experience. The book is an impressively well-researched and captivating account of the place of children and primary schools during and in the wake of the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, which devastated Tokyo. It has three aims. First, it sheds light on first-hand accounts of children in the Great Kantō Earthquake. Second, it examines how and why children and schools are now central to disaster preparedness strategies in Japan. Third, it shows that, contrary to popular media representations that circulated outside of Japan after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, Japanese people have not always been “naturally” calm in the face of devastating disasters. Borland’s analysis offers historical data for how such behaviour has been cultivated through primary education in Japan.

*Earthquake Children* is in productive conversation with relevant scholarship on the history of earthquakes and disasters in Japan, especially of the Great Kantō Earthquake, and to a lesser extent, with the literature on the history of children and childhood in Japan and disaster research in general. Its main contribution is in richly illustrating how children and primary schools became sites of concern and possibility in creating a “resilient Japan”. While Japan’s attention to disaster education today can be placed in global context, this book provides an important national historical grounding, which can be lacking in disaster scholarship. Conversely, however, the analyses could have been
slightly widened to interrogate some key concepts in disaster studies, such as resilience, in order to strengthen the book's relevance beyond Japanese Studies.

Borland takes us on a clear journey through the seven main chapters, following a carefully considered sequence from children's experiences (Chapter 2), to their construction as objects of care (Chapter 3) and investigation (Chapter 4), and then shifting the gaze to educators (Chapter 5), disaster experts and government officials (Chapter 6), and architects in the rebuilding of schools (Chapter 7). After the first chapter that lays out the background of a young and vulnerable Tokyo in the 1920s, the second chapter hits the reader hard with poignant children's accounts of the Great Kantō Earthquake. There are essays that the children wrote about their ordeals in the disaster, and most heart-breaking are their crayon drawings in colour. There is one that is particularly devastating. Figure 8 on page 62 shows a poem that an eleven-year-old girl wrote about her sister, asking herself if the little sister that she loved so much died in the canal. “It must have been painful if she drowned in the water, it must have been hot if she burned in the fires”, she writes. The poem is accompanied by a drawing of a little girl in a blue and white kimono with a red obi (sash or belt), burying her face in her hands. The pain of not simply losing a loved one but having them disappear resonates with the experiences of many people in 2011.

There are, in addition, two aspects to this chapter that are noteworthy. One is how children in the narratives appear as relational subjects, an important perspective in child studies. Although Borland herself does not seem to purposefully present them this way, the children always tell of family members who helped them and whom they helped, or strangers with whom they huddled together to survive a fire. The second observation about this chapter is the recounting of the massacre of Koreans in the aftermath of the earthquake, as citizens formed vigilante groups in response to rumours that Koreans were behaving violently around various neighbourhoods. Children retell these rumours and fears in their essays. The fact that this horror appears in the chapter about children's first-hand accounts is chilling.

Chapters 3 and 4 build on the archival material from chapter 2 to show how children became objects of sympathy, care, and specialist (psychological) investigation. The children's essays, which were written simply as part of schoolwork, were taken up by city officials and the media as “honest” expressions of young people's suffering, needs, and resilience. The portrayal of children's hardship after the earthquake enabled a variety of people, from the imperial family to overseas groups, to showcase their humanitarian sentiments

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1 Alanen 2001.
(p. 98, p. 102). The situation also provided an opportunity for psychologists to study the effects of trauma on child development (p. 118), although Borland does not discuss how exactly the figure of the child shaped the science of psychology during this time. Taken together, these two chapters illustrate how “the resilient child was an exemplar for others across Japan – children as well as adults – in an era of spiritual renewal and national reconstruction” (p. 134).

The remaining chapters spotlight the adults in this story of recovery from the Great Kantō Earthquake: teachers and education officials who worked tirelessly to provide relief to people who took refuge in schools and to facilitate the children’s return to education; scientists, education elites, and architects who sought to reconstruct schools, children, and Japanese society in general to be better than before, recalling current discourses of Build Back Better. Chapter 6 on the work of education elites and scientists such as the seismologist Imamura Akitsune is the most fascinating, as many of their ideas, such as the importance of mainstreaming disaster preparedness in school curricula (and the challenges to that), resonate closely with disaster education efforts today. The connections these actors saw between disaster education and moral education, and thereby the improvement of Japanese citizens overall, are also instructive in thinking about today’s disaster preparedness efforts along similar lines. In short, Borland’s historical analysis elucidates how preparedness is not only about disasters but also about how a society articulates its visions of a good future. The last chapter illustrates how this vision of the future – a modern and well-managed society – was expressed through the reconstruction of schools. It would have deepened our understanding of how exactly children and schools became the focus of disaster preparedness strategies in Japan if Borland had explained why certain people’s ideas about reconstruction were taken up; in other words, what were the capillaries of power that shored up authority around some proposals or people, and not others?

One question that Borland left underexamined is the meaning of resilience. On pp. 7–8 she offers some definitions from disaster studies, and the concept is left predetermined thereafter throughout the book. This does not take away from the strengths of the monograph but it raises the question of how the different actors around the Great Kantō Earthquake defined “resilience”, since the concept as it is used today is usually attributed to C.S. Holling’s work on

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2 Build Back Better is a term that derives from the history of international disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. It is now Priority 4 of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (Fernandez and Ahmed 2019).

ecological systems or to psychological studies of children in Europe and the US affected by the Second World War. Furthermore, there are many disaster scholars who are critical of the notion of resilience, as it points to a neoliberal, depoliticized expectation that individual citizens and communities should shoulder the burden of disaster risk reduction. Does *Earthquake Children* offer a different historiography and understanding of resilience? Relatedly, does it provide a new understanding of the figure of the child in twentieth-century Japan?

These questions are meant to provoke further discussion about the book and in no way should detract from the contributions it makes. *Earthquake Children* is informative, captivating, and at times deeply moving, and will be a great resource for historians of Japan, disaster scholars, and childhood studies scholars.

**About the Author**

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4 Masten 2014.
5 For example, Joseph 2013.
References


