
**Alex Bates**

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*Earthquake Nation* is an in-depth exploration of how, at least in the case of architecture and building, the modernization of Japan was not a simple technological transfer from West to East, but a specific adaptation of western technology to the seismicity of the Japanese archipelago. The need of buildings in Japan to resist earthquakes demanded both new knowledge beyond that developed in the west as well as a reconsideration of the old building traditions of Japanese *daiku* 大工 (carpenter-builders). In this book, Gregory Clancey traces the development of both architecture's creation of new methods to resist earthquakes and the genesis of the field of seismology in Japan.

Despite the title, the emphasis in *Earthquake Nation* is on the technological development not the disaster. Though there is a great deal of focus on the Great Nobi earthquake (Nōbi daijishin 浓尾大地震) of 1891, this study is less about a particular earthquake than it is about the effects of earthquakes in general on the development of Japanese modern architecture and seismology. This emphasis distances the book from the field of disaster studies in that it dwells not on the damage or even the political aftermath of a specific earthquake, but rather on how disaster shaped the ‘technosocial’ development of Japan. As Clancey puts it, the book does not pursue “a political or social history of earthquakes per se, but their emergences as objects of Meiji period knowledge making,” in other words how Japanese seismicity “restructured disciplines, institutions, and even individual careers around itself, and sometimes set them in conflict” (pp. 4-5). As such, Clancey’s work has more in common with other studies of the Meiji period (and especially Jordan Sand’s 2003 book...
Clancey’s book begins with the story of the yatoi (lit. hired person), the western visitors brought to Japan to teach the rising generation about developments in western technology. These scientists, architects and teachers brought not only technology, but also an ideology that saw western technology as the pinnacle of human development. Clancey’s initial focus is on the “father of modern Japanese architecture”, Josiah Conder (1852-1920). Conder assumed that brick and stone signified the apex of a teleological evolution in building and judged Japan’s reliance on wood as not only a serious impediment to their modernizing effort but a sign of a weaker (and more effeminate) civilization in contrast to a West that could claim the great stone ruins of Greece and Rome as its heritage. Conder’s prejudice at first led his Japanese students to disregard the rich Japanese architectural heritage in the daiku traditions and to model their work on the West and see its history in masonry as their own.

Though daiku work was denigrated by the western architects and their pupils, there remained in greater Japan a scepticism that these new rigid brick structures could withstand Japan’s frequent earthquakes as well as Japanese wooden buildings. Some western scholars even began to pay attention to traditional buildings that had stood for centuries. They especially championed tall pagodas as aseismic architectural marvels, an effort vigorously challenged by the masonry-centered architectural regime. It was the emerging field of seismology, however, that brought the most damning evidence against masonry. In fact, British geologist John Milne (1850-1913), a founding father of the field of seismology, noticed during his time in Japan that gauging the power of earthquakes was more difficult because of the disparity between damage to Japanese homes and those in the western settlements of Yokohama. This dilemma prompted the invention of the seismograph and a rethinking of the suitability of brick and stone in Japanese buildings.

In the midst of the debate the Great Nobi Earthquake struck. True to the seismologist’s claims, the brick buildings fared worse than the “traditional” wood structures, though Clancey notes that the difference was exaggerated. Conder retained his faith in rigid structures and masonry, but the disaster caused him and his students to rethink the question of

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seismicity in Japanese architecture. In terms of popular opinion, however, the damage to the reputation of western building was irreparable. Clancey sees this shift of opinion in popular representations of the disaster. Many woodblock print images emphasize the ruins of modernity, including brick buildings, telegraph wires, ruined bridges and derailed trains (despite the fact that no trains derailed in the disaster). In one striking example, Clancey analyzes the contrast between the spectacular ruins of the brick Nagoya Spinning Mill in the foreground and the stable Nagoya Castle in the distance. Images such as these critiqued the runaway importation of western ideas and techniques characteristic of the Rokumeikan (鹿鳴館) era, so named for the building that housed the elaborate western-style parties of the time. Clancey’s argument places the suspicions of Japanese toward the western brick masonry work in the context of rising Japanese nationalism during the “turn to Japan” in the 1890s.

The link between the architectural debates, the Great Nobi Earthquake, and nationalism is a secondary, but important, thread in the book. In this, Earthquake Nation complements Kenneth Pyle’s look at 1890s nationalism in his 1969 book, The New Generation in Meiji Japan² by showing how this rejection of British technology is in some ways anti-colonial. At the same time as Japanese seismologists found in their own traditional buildings techniques that bested British bricklaying, they also asserted Japanese technological prowess in their growing empire. One student of Milne’s, Ōmori Fusakichi 大森房吉 (1868-1923), insisted that native structures in Taiwan required Japanese guidance to resist earthquakes after the 1906 earthquake there.

The remaining third of the book deals with the aftermath of the Nobi Earthquake and the waning power of Japan’s image as “Earthquake Nation” after the Great Kanto Earthquake (Kantō daishinsai 関東大震災) in 1923. These chapters also give more attention to the Japanese students of Conder and Milne, including architects such as Itō Chūta 伊東忠太 (1867-1954), Itō Tamekichi 伊藤貞吉 (1864-1943), and Sano Toshikata 佐野利器 (1880-1956) and the seismologists Ōmori Fusakichi and Imamura Akitsune 今村明恒 (1870-1948). Despite the subtitle claiming a study of seismicity to 1930, the book is primarily focused on the Meiji era with the events of the Great Kanto Earthquake serving as an epilogue. It was in the aftermath of this later earthquake, Clancey argues, perceptively though counter-intuitively, that the status of Japan as an “earthquake nation” was displaced by both native desire to be disassociated from the

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weakness suggested by disaster and foreign ideas of an ahistorical Japanese architectural modernism.

Earthquake Nation is clearly the result of disciplined archival work in the English and Japanese language journals of the day, but does not neglect the contemporary secondary scholarship on this era being done in Japan and throughout the world. It is a significant contribution to the scholarship on Meiji Japan and on Japanese architectural, technological and scientific history.