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Seismic Japan: The Long History and Continuing Legacy of the Ansei Edo Earthquake, by G. Smits/ When the Earth Roars: Lessons from the History of Earthquakes in Japan, by G. Smits

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Book review

G. Smits, *Seismic Japan: The Long History and Continuing Legacy of the Ansei Edo Earthquake*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2013. 262 + x pp.

G. Smits, *When the Earth Roars: Lessons from the History of Earthquakes in Japan*, Rowman & Littlefield, Plymouth, 2014, 209 + xv pp.

If I had to pin-point one growth area within Japanese Studies in the past five years, then it would surely be research relating to disasters. Of course, the events of 11 March 2011 have not only seemingly spawned some of this interest, but the 'triple disaster' of 3/11 has also been the focus of many of these studies. As, at the time of writing, only five years have passed, it is still sometimes hard to see all aspects of the events of 2011 in context, and some of the studies published closer to the event have suffered even more in this respect. Focusing on a more historical disaster has the advantage of a greater opportunity to see the full picture and reduce the probability of new information being uncovered or additional events occurring that undermine the conclusions of a study. But studying historical disasters is not without its own pitfalls.

One of the challenges with studies of historical disasters is ensuring there is a reason for people to read the study. With larger events, such as the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake or the 1985 JAL plane crash, this may not be such a problem as the scale itself can be a driving force for

some to read the work. Different authors with different conclusions about what happened and its long-term impact may even provide reason for reading more than one study about the topic. It is possibly a greater challenge for those who work on a less well-known event to reach an audience beyond the seemingly growing body of people who are interested in disasters in Japan.

I therefore have much admiration for Gregory Smits for making the Ansei Edo earthquake of 1855 the focus of his study *Seismic Japan*. I think it is very commendable to go back to an older quake – particularly one that I suspect that many Japanese are unfamiliar with, let alone an English-speaking audience – to look at what happened and to see whether there are any longer term lessons to learn from it. For those studying earthquakes in Japan and wanting to add some additional context to the studies coming about 3/11, the book would appear to have much to offer. But therein would appear to be one of the challenges it struggles with; who is the book actually for? If you are unfamiliar with earthquakes in general, the history of earthquakes in Japan or Japan's history, the book tries to help you, but it does not always do the job fully. For example, in the first chapter we are introduced to a number of significant earthquakes in Japan's history, including the one that is the primary focus of the study. The summaries are probably helpful for those unfamiliar with them, but the disparity in space

devoted to each is somewhat puzzling, let alone including a few earthquakes after the 1855 earthquake; and why spend a page here on the Ansei Edo earthquake when it gets a whole chapter later on? There is information about how earthquakes happen, S-Waves, P-Waves and the Japanese intensity scale, but it is not brought together in a section that keeps this all together and makes it easy for the reader to find and refer back to when needed (despite having a chapter called ‘Why the Earth Shakes’) nor put neatly into a structure that shows how ideas and understanding have changed over time (i.e. having a structure that allows our knowledge to evolve as it may have done throughout Japan’s history) – although this appears to be what was attempted. Of course, with many more people writing about earthquakes and perhaps a greater understanding now than a decade ago about them, such contextual information may not be relevant for a number of readers.

Smits (2013, p. 4) states that he is arguing that ‘the Ansei Edo earthquake played a pivotal role in a process of shaping conceptions of Japan in the realms of politics, religion, geography, and natural science.’ These are grand claims and the information, based on extensive and meticulous research – as evidenced by notes, references and a bibliography that accounts for around a quarter of the book’s length – is undoubtedly in there. However, I felt a little lost at times and it was not always clear to me how the book was leading me through the subject matter and getting to the conclusion that fits with the quotation at the start of this paragraph. Perhaps the book, by trying to sell itself on the basis of this one earthquake having a long-term legacy, undermined some of its ultimate impact; but this is a widespread problem coming with the pressures many academics

face with trying to show the value of their work to contemporary readers and to aid publishers with sales.

Only a year after *Seismic Japan*, Smits published a further study on Japan’s earthquakes. The cover of the book uses an image of some destruction from the 3/11 disaster, but the subtitle makes it clear that this book is about ‘lessons from the history of earthquakes in Japan’ rather than about the events of 2011, although it gets mentioned to aid with linking between this event and the historical ones. In *When the Earth Roars*, Smits aims to ‘advance arguments’ in three areas; the chaotic and differing nature of each earthquake, the science and knowledge of earthquakes, and ‘resource allocation and approaches to seismic hazards’ (Smith 2014, pp. xi–xiv). It is, of course, the realities of this first area that have complicated developments in the second area and ultimately make improvements in the final area so hard. Compared with *Seismic Japan*, however, it is noticeable that Smits has not set out to prove a particular, significant, conclusion, but is aiming to ‘advance arguments’. Far from being a negative point, it is an underlying strength of the book.

The structure of *When the Earth Roars* is somewhat different to *Seismic Japan*. A simple example of this points to how the books differ, and why, in the end, if I had to choose one book over the other (working on the basis some readers may only have the time or resources to read one book on historical earthquakes of Japan), I would pick *When the Earth Roars*. More and more, in a single monography by one author, it is perhaps the norm that all the notes and references appear together towards the end of the book. However, in *When the Earth Roars* we find the notes and references at the end of each chapter. This gives the advantage that for those being recommended to read on a particular


topic, pointing them to a single chapter (albeit that the bibliography is still at the end of the book), becomes that much easier. The chapters sit within this book like well-contained, well-researched and well-written articles. But this is not to say that the chapters do not fit well with each other within the book, for structurally I found the book much easier to follow than *Seismic Japan*.

In conclusion, both books have significant things to add to the ever-growing literature on disasters in Japan. Smits has clearly done an extensive amount of research and has done well to, for the most part, focus on events and subject matter that others have not. There is originality in both books, therefore, and those working on disasters in Japan will find both books useful in their own way. For those such as

students writing on earthquakes, aspects of science and technology in Japan, or Japan's history, who perhaps do not have the resources to read as much, then the structure of *When the Earth Roars* will be of greater benefit, but even so they should be encouraged to read *Seismic Japan*.

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