

JAPAN

Earthquake Nation: The Cultural Politics of Japanese Seismicity, 1868–1930. By GREGORY CLANCEY. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006. xiii, 331 pp. \$49.95 (cloth).

How “natural” are natural disasters? In the case of earthquakes, the disaster is more man-made than natural; as the saying goes, “Earthquakes don’t kill people, buildings kill people.” In *Earthquake Nation*, Gregory Clancey shows how the meanings of earthquakes extend far beyond death and physical destruction. He uses the term *seismicity* to refer to the complex and far-reaching discourses that stem from

seismic phenomena. Focusing on engineers, scientists, and architects, he analyzes Meiji-period earthquakes as the crux for arguments concerning architecture, construction, science, and Japanese identity.

Although overshadowed by the 1923 Great Kantô Earthquake, for Clancey the 1891 Great Nôbi Earthquake was the crucial event in Japanese seismicity. In the 1870s and 1880s, the Japanese government sponsored Western-style masonry architecture; competing models were produced by other figures, especially the *daiku*, or traditional designer/builders. At the same time, earthquakes, which had never been a Japanese obsession, became a major topic as foreign architects, engineers, and scientists debated the seismic qualities of Japanese and foreign construction systems. Key figures included the seismologist John Milne and the architect Josiah Conder, known as the fathers of their respective professions in Japan. Clancey emphasizes the schisms within these discourses on earthquakes, describing how interests and individuals used earthquakes to develop their own positions on architecture, engineering, and construction. Milne, for instance, argued that European-style masonry was unsuitable to Japan, whereas Conder remained committed to introducing orthodox English architecture.

The Great Nôbi Earthquake of 1891 served as a referendum on architecture and seismology, destroying tens of thousands of buildings and killing approximately 7,300 people. One consequence was heightened interest in seismology, represented by the establishment of the Imperial Earthquake Investigation Committee, "the first interdisciplinary scientific research body established by the Meiji state" (p. 151). Already the foremost site of seismology in the 1880s, Japan became what Clancey calls an "earthquake nation," where the consciousness of earthquakes reached new heights in science and construction.

In architecture, the Nôbi earthquake prompted reevaluations of existing principles and even temporarily weakened the walls surrounding the elitist realm of official, state-sponsored architecture. As Clancey writes, "Japanese architects after Nôbi accepted the need to alter European and American building technology to suit Japanese nature, turning what was formerly a self-conscious practice of inheritance into a mandate for invention" (p. 211). This increased interest in producing uniquely Japanese buildings was one of many strands in the nativist turn of the 1880s and 1890s, including the rise of historical preservation, the writings of the *Seikyôsha*, and the use of traditional building techniques for the new Imperial Palace.

Although Clancey focuses on the late nineteenth century, he briefly treats the decades around the 1923 Great Kantô Earthquake, another watershed in the history of seismicity. The destruction of Tokyo undermined seismology's claims as a developed, pragmatic science, and other developments in the 1930s and 1940s diverted materials and interests to other topics. Although still a nation of earthquakes, Japan was no longer an earthquake nation.

Through the finely detailed narrative of *Earthquake Nation*, Clancey addresses several broader issues relevant to Japanese historical studies in general and to architectural history in particular. He writes, "this book is a work of history, but one that attempts to be faithful to transdisciplinarity, as one step toward an academy less disciplined against (and more nurturing toward) studies that cross multiple borders" (p. 8). This approach works particularly well because the fields he examines—architecture, science, engineering, construction—were themselves in the process of defining themselves in the late 1800s. Seismicity became important in part because it provided a field in which diverse figures could stake claims to expertise, whether in Japanese carpentry, Western architecture, or modern science.

Another of Clancey's general aims is to deconstruct the simplistic dyads that often appear in treatments of Meiji-period technology and architecture: Japan/West, traditional/modern, wood/masonry, vernacular/high architecture. Through a close examination of writings, designs, and artifacts, he shows how individuals interpreted and transformed these dualistic categories and how a given phenomenon could be coded in multiple ways. Within the historiography of architecture in modern Japan, *Earthquake Nation* offers an alternative to narratives that treat architecture as style and/or construction. In Meiji Japan, architects—that is, figures officially trained in the field—played a comparatively minor role in the overall culture of building. Their numbers were small, and their influence was most manifest in a relatively narrow range of buildings. Thus, histories that focus on architects or on narrowly defined issues of architecture and art fail to capture the distinct character of the time. In contrast, by focusing on seismicity and a broad range of related figures, Clancey constructs a richer and more appropriate treatment of a major issue in Meiji architecture. For these and other intellectual reasons, and also because Clancey writes with verve and wit, *Earthquake Nation* will prove valuable to anyone seeking to understand Meiji Japan.

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