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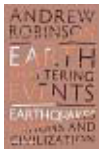
Ready to rumble

A grisly history of earthquakes reveals that we still cannot predict where the next one will strike. *Tim Auld* reports

EARTH-SHATTERING EVENTS
by Andrew Robinson



256PP, THAMES & HUDSON, £18.95

★★★★½

Nearly half of the world's big cities now lie in areas at risk from earthquakes," writes Andrew Robinson towards the end of *Earth-Shattering Events*. It's a chilling statement made all the more so in the light of the stories he has told in the previous pages, which leave the reader punch drunk: 750,000 sleeping Chinese killed in the Tangshan quake in 1976; 170,000 in Banda Aceh in 2004; 140,000 in Japan in 1923; 40,000 in Lisbon in 1755. There are stories of people being boiled alive in canals or snatched up by charring whirlwinds of flame, of a train that was picked up and smashed by a wave, all 1,500 lives wiped out in the blink of an eye.

Robinson has written about natural disasters before and he clearly knows his stuff. He hits the reader with flashy jargon – "subduction zones", "interplate"; and he's partial to quoting academic sources at rather more length than they deserve. But for the most part this study of the impact of earthquakes on human civilisations does zip along, an engaging mixture of fact, anecdote and historical analysis. Robinson has a talent for evoking chaos and, unavoidably, his brain-melting descriptions have a disaster-movie quality – it's hard to tear your eye away from the page.

But this book is more than a gratuitous chamber of natural horrors. In part, it is about mankind's ongoing failure to penetrate the mysteries of the slipping and sliding of the Earth's crust. "The whole field of earthquake prediction is plainly wide open for speculation," writes Robinson, which suggests that my guess about where and when the next major quake will happen is as good as his. Robinson notes a particularly precocious rabbit, mentioned by Plutarch, which was said to have had a premonition of the earthquake in Sparta in 464BC. The book is also about our failure to learn from the past. Man likes to build his cities on major fault-lines, as history proves again and again; he also likes to rebuild them, in the same place, but no more robust.

Robinson's primary interest, however, lies in how, throughout history, one man's disaster has been another's opportunity. His tale of chancers begins, somewhat surprisingly, in Britain. Back in 1750, two earthquakes struck London, and there were three more around the country. It became known as "the Year of Earthquakes".

The first tremors in London were felt on February 8, resulting in a lamp-lighter nearly falling from his ladder and a hayloft collapsing in Southwark. Exactly a month later, the second shocks came. Fortunately for us, the politician Horace Walpole was there to comment on the ensuing chaos. An army trooper, who would end up in Bedlam, predicted that a third quake would hit on April 8, which would "swallow up London". According to Walpole, in preparation for that date, women had "earthquake gowns" made: "that is, warm gowns to sit out of doors all night"; one country lady, sure that the end of the world was nigh, determined to come into town because all her friends were there and she couldn't see the point of surviving without them.

The trooper's quake never happened, but it did fan the flames of conflict between clergy and scientists. John Wesley seized the chance to attribute the quakes to the sinfulness of the British people. Five years later, when Lisbon was hit by a catastrophic earthquake, the future Bishop of Gloucester, William Warburton, eloquently stated the bind in which the Church found itself: "To suppose these desolations the scourge of heaven for human impieties is a dreadful reflection, and yet to suppose ourselves in a forlorn and

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fatherless world is 10 times a more frightful consideration."

Robinson carries the reader across the next 250 years in nuanced, if wordy, stories: about how the Caracas quake of 1812 led to Simon Bolivar releasing South America from Spanish rule; how Tokyo's earthquake in 1923 may have led to the militarisation of Japan and its role in the Second World War; how Narendra Modi rose to power in India in the wake of the Gujarat disaster in 2001; how the tsunami of 2004 led to the routing of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. He finishes with a sobering look at the nuclear power plant meltdown in Fukushima in Japan, and asks what, if anything, has been learnt.

The answer seems to be: not enough. But the Earth will move and there's not a thing we can do to stop it. If Robinson hasn't any brilliant solutions, he's not alone.

October 1989

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At risk: the aftermath of an earthquake in San Francisco in October 1989