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Hanneke van Asperen and Lotte Jensen (eds.), *Dealing with Disasters from Early Modern to Modern Times. Cultural Responses to Catastrophes* (Amsterdam University Press; Amsterdam, 2023) 337 p., €129,00 ISBN 9789463725798

Representing historical disasters

This edited volume is the first in a new series of historical approaches to ‘Disaster Studies’, and is the product of a 2021 conference connected to an NWO VICI project led by Lotte Jensen at the Radboud Universiteit, Nijmegen. The contributions collectively address disasters in the recent and distant past from a cultural perspective—more specifically the representation of various environmental or biological hazards such as earthquakes, floods, and epidemics by different social groups via different kinds of written, visual, and material media. By representation, we also learn that past disasters have been misrepresented or manipulated, sometimes consciously for particular purposes. The lines between representation and misrepresentation, however, are blurry – and what historians can show is that disasters have been represented by different individuals and groups according to a kind of ‘social frame’ (based around shared values, concerns, and reference points) that potentially deviate starkly from today, but made sense to those at the time.

The book has a useful, synthesizing introduction by the two editors, and then approaches historical disaster representation in a series of fourteen contributions which are divided up into three coherent themes addressing emotions, blame, and time. Each contribution is full of nuance yet unpacked in an accessible way to the reader. Although sometimes fracturing society and leading some groups to be targeted in the disaster rhetoric, one of the more interesting messages of the book is that disasters in the past have quite often served as a form of

solidarity – even if this cohesion was never total and sometimes excluded certain people. However, the most important aspect of the book we should take heed of is that not only do disaster narratives and discourses change over time and space, but they are also created by communities and societies that do not necessarily experience the impact of the hazard directly. Accordingly, these narratives can be appropriated by particular interest groups for different purposes – sometimes fitting within a tradition or formula – and perhaps one of the most important research objectives for historians working on disasters is to now try to understand how and why they come to be appropriated in certain ways, as this is also fundamental to understanding the persistence and loss of collective disaster memories.

This is an important point because it means that cultural history approaches to disasters such as this volume should be seen as a significant starting point, but (perhaps ironically) it is clear that getting to the roots of the appropriation of these narratives cannot be solved solely by cultural history methods and approaches in isolation. Disaster ‘sensemaking’ deviated across heterogeneous communities, but not everyone had the power to make their view heard – and certainly not in written form (as noted on p. 32-34). In order to better understand who is ‘controlling the message’ surrounding disaster representation, and the direction, spread, and nature of the stories and narratives told, and the types of people involved, we also need to be able to understand the composition of society itself and the distribution of power

and access to resources across communities which is then subject to change over time. This volume, then, rather than convincingly privileging cultural history approaches to disasters, shows the necessity of a more organic integration of cultural history with other branches of social, economic, political, and environmental history. Put simply, this volume is asking all the important questions, but whether they are answered will depend on the contribution of others.

It is always difficult to keep an edited volume focused and on point, and so it is to the editors' credit that there is coherence in the contributions. Nevertheless, there are some points of critique that could have been thought through a bit more. Nine of the fourteenth contributions pertain entirely or largely to a Low Countries subject. Hence, are we talking about 'cultural responses to catastrophes' or are we talking about a more particularized framework of disaster narratives? Likewise, the temporal markers used in the book are left without explicit comment. By this, I do not mean necessarily 'why is Antiquity or the Middle Ages not involved?', but what is the analytical significance of this apparent contrast between 'early modern' and 'modern times'? What is the rationale for setting the book up this way? It needed more elaborate embedding within broader discussions on the transition to 'modernity', and then how this related back to disaster representation. Perhaps most significantly, one aspect in the book that did surface in some contributions was the very loose and weakly developed suggestions about 'lessons for present-day crises' (p. 135). Based on the

concluding statements of most chapters, to me it seems that all we can say from the findings of this book is that sometimes historical societies responded to disasters in a recognizable way to those today, and sometimes they did not. A methodology for how we apply historicized observations to the present is not properly developed (and many historians will dispute whether that is even a useful goal to be pursued).

Each of the contributions taken individually brings important conceptual or empirical insights, and there is little room in a short review to elaborate on them in detail. Just read the book. After all, it has generously been made open access. Many of the findings find resonance with already ongoing work, especially on the Low Countries. We have important reflections on the role of disasters in fashioning feelings of community, solidarity, blame, trauma, (selective) remembrance, cooperation, pity, precarity, vulnerability, decline, tragedy, privilege, and much more. For me, the book shows that there is a major (collaborative) research project waiting to be funded – not just on what disasters are remembered, but which disasters have we chosen to forget or have not been left commemorated (and why). Cultural history needs to be at the heart of this, but invigorated and strengthened through supporting contributions from economic and social history, memory studies, digital humanities, and those concerned with material culture and heritage.

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