

James Cornell, *The Great International Disaster Book*. New York: Scribner's, 1976, 382 pp., US \$ 12.50.

The Great International Disaster Book is a book that has major impetus from the author's association with the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Short-Lived Phenomena, during which tenure he helped prepare many of the Center's "annual reports." He is presently manager of the publications department of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Mass.

The present book is really two books in one. The first seventy-three pages are about "... how man perceives disaster and how he copes with its threat, both psychologically and practically". It is, as the author notes, a "brief and most general" summary. This, of course, is the first section's main drawback. The first seventy-three pages cover: disaster, prediction, prevention, and preparedness (Chapter 1); disaster's impact on society (Chapter 2); and preparations for the inevitable (Chapter 3). In such a short space, each of these very complex topics is only briefly touched upon. While certainly interesting, the material presented is too general to be of much use to any but the most lay reader. Serious students of disasters would do best to skip these filler chapters that present, incidentally, some incorrect information — the declaration of martial law in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, for instance, as well as outdated information — tornado frequency and incidence charts that end in 1970, flood damage estimates that end in 1969, loss of life charts that end in 1968.

The remaining three hundred pages comprise the second section. It is an annotated compilation of the greatest natural and man-made disasters to affect mankind. By covering avalanches, cyclones, earthquakes, famines, floods, landslides, pestilence, tornadoes, tsunami, volcanoes, weather, explosions and collapses, fires, and transportation accidents, Cornell has combined in a single volume the real nuggets of the varied information on disasters that is scattered throughout much diverse literature. As it is intended to be a bibliographic reference for writers, editors, researchers, workers, and casual readers, the author states that "...this catalog is not intended to be read at one sitting." Here Cornell underestimates the pure pleasure he has created. The stories he recounts on different disasters, both American and worldwide, are vignettes that are so informative, so interesting, and so novel that a reader would seriously find it difficult to lay the book aside once he has begun reading. The book reads more like a series of short stories than a bibliographic catalog. It presents in a single volume information that would ordinarily take a researcher many hours of toil to bring to light. And certain of Cornell's disaster stories are enhanced by the little gems he has uncovered. For example, the repeated frequency of major disasters occurring on religious holidays: the 1775 Lisbon earthquake on All Saints Day or the 1964 Good Friday Alaskan earthquake; the vulnerability of schools and their occupants to disaster: the 1933 Long Beach earthquake, the 1937 New London, Texas explosion, the 1908 Cleveland fire; the role of prostitutes and venereal diseases in disaster: the London Plague of 1665 or the 1975 Omaha tornado; and the role of wartime censorship in the reporting of disaster: the 1942 "Queen Mary" and the 1944 Salerno train crash.

The book is worth its price if a reader even viewed it only as a political history of disaster. It is quite informative in noting the following governmental decisions due to dis-

aster: the Okeechobee-Everglades flood control program due to the 1928 Florida hurricane; the reorganization of the Weather Bureau after the 1938 New England hurricane; the first national disaster relief act following the New Madrid earthquake of 1811; the passage of the Field Act following the Long Beach earthquake of 1933; the establishment of the Seismic Sea Warning System after the 1946 Hawaiian tsunami; and many, many more.

This book is a valued addition to the store of disaster literature and should be in the library of every serious disaster researcher as well as the general reader; it is a treasure of information that will entice as well as delight.

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