

# DiSASTERS

*image and context*



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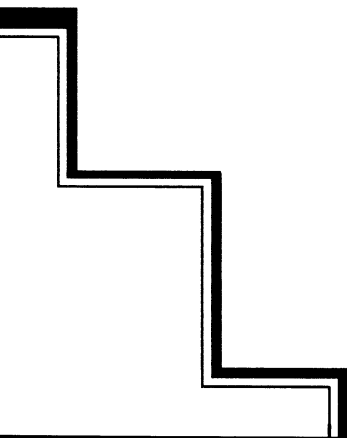
*image and context*

Peter Hinton *editor*



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# Contents

|    |   |  |     |
|----|---|--|-----|
| 1  | Introduction  | <i>Peter Hinton</i>                    | 1   |
| 2  | The Mount Kembla Mine Disaster, 1902:<br>Quarrying the Seams of Evidence<br>to Assay the Human Response   | <i>Stuart Piggin</i>                   | 11  |
| 3  | "Bushfires Unite; Floods Divide":<br>The Cultural Context of Disasters                                    | <i>Susan Baggett</i>                   | 27  |
| 4  | Shipwrecks: Images and Perceptions of<br>Nineteenth Century Maritime Disasters                            | <i>Mark Staniforth</i>                 | 45  |
| 5  | The Newcastle Earthquake Experience:<br>The Human Context and its Implications<br>for Disaster Management | <i>R.V. Anderson &amp; M.M. Cotton</i> | 65  |
| 6  | Constructing Meaning in an Epidemic Interpretations<br>of a Diagnosis of HIV Infection and AIDS           | <i>Robert Ariss</i>                    | 77  |
| 7  | The Yamano Disaster   | <i>Matthew Allen</i>                   | 91  |
| 8  | Disaster and Disaster-response in a Mediaeval Context:<br>the First Crusade                               | <i>J.O. Ward</i>                       | 105 |
| 9  | Visions of Disaster in the<br>Central Middle Ages   | <i>Lola Sharon Davidson</i>            | 141 |
| 10 | Coping with Disaster:<br>Florence after The Black Death   | <i>James Hatty</i>                     | 153 |
| 11 | Daniel Defoe's<br>"A Journal of the Plague Year"  | <i>David Brooks</i>                    | 167 |
| 12 | Afterword   | <i>S.N. Mukherjee</i>                  | 187 |
|    | Notes on Contributors   |  | 197 |



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# 1

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## **Introduction: Some Observations on Disasters**

*Peter Hinton*

Disasters are events laden with significance. Men and women endow the classic disasters with a mythic dimension and the names of the places where they occurred are remembered as in a litany: Pompeii, Krakatoa, Hiroshima, Chernobyl, Borphal.

A look at the origins of the word disaster is instructive. In the original Greek, it meant 'movement of a star'; 'the blasts or stroke of an unpropitious star' (Ward, this volume). The Greeks sometimes saw the uncharacteristic movement of stars as portents of disaster. The stars could indicate divine displeasure with mortals, and if sufficiently angry, the gods' retribution could be manifest in a natural disaster, or possibly in a military defeat.

Reflections on disasters today indicate that a similar eschatological consciousness remain as people plumb the depths of their imaginations in search of the meanings of these events. This is in spite of the fact that within a dominant discourse of scientific rationality, one might expect disasters to be defined as purely physical events. But we still see disasters as carrying messages of great importance.

Writer and lecturer Susan George, on her recent visit to Australia was reported as suggesting that the world 'may need another disaster'. George was concerned, the newspaper story went on, that humanity had tired of hearing the message that it needed to 'preserve cultural and physical diversity, to halt the destruction of natural habitats, cut greenhouse gas emissions and to reassess society's goals and values.' The report continues, 'that's why she believes a catastrophe may be in order - something along the lines of Chernobyl but without the fatalities'. George says 'I am almost



thinking we should have a serious shake-up . . . something that wakes people up, but doesn't tip us over the brink. . . . I don't know what that would be. Maybe a biological flip somewhere, with the coastal water becoming so polluted off New York and Boston that nothing can live there . . . Maybe even another Chernobyl' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Sept. 25 1992).

Susan George has much in common with the prophets of old. She is saying that humanity has strayed; we have been greedy and destructive so that 'we are now cutting off the branch on which we are sitting' (*Sydney Morning Herald* Sept 25, 1992) We have not listened to our own seers, thus a firm message from the gods is necessary. A disaster - nothing too severe, mind you - would deliver us a salutary lesson, would serve as a sign that we should mend our ways.

Susan George may have had in mind the longer term effects of the atomic bomb which was dropped on Hiroshima when she spoke as she did. This bomb not only brought World War II to an abrupt end, it also made it patently clear to humankind that we had at last developed a weapon that could obliterate all life on this planet. Had the bomb not been dropped, and had it not caused massive death and destruction, it is conceivable, when the Cold War was on the verge of becoming a hot war, that humanity may well have destroyed itself.

But the now familiar mushroom cloud signified other things. Its eruption signalled, perhaps more than any other event, the end of the Enlightenment dream that humanity could achieve peace, prosperity and progress through the application of scientific rationality. If the Bomb was one of science's ultimate achievements, then it was clear that a science which was not constrained by ethical and spiritual valuations would seal our ultimate doom.

The Hiroshima Bomb was thus a true disaster in that it not only caused great death and destruction; it also promoted deep reflection, fired the imagination and, paradoxically, raised renewed hope for redemption.

In contemplating the broader significance of disasters, it is easy to forget that they kill and maim large numbers of human beings. The diaries, notes, letters and literary creations of survivors are quite often forgotten when the interpreters and evaluators take over. Thus a priest, a scientist, a journalist or an academic is more likely to be heard than the person in the street.

David Brooks' paper in this volume relates to this proposition. Brooks' paper concerns Daniel Defoe's work, *A Journal of the Plague Year*. The latter purports to be an account written by a merchant who was in London during the Great Plague of 1665. In fact it was written in Marseilles in 1772 when an outbreak of plague in this French city threatened to assume the proportions of the London epidemic. Its purpose was to offer suggestions to the Marseilles authorities on how to handle the outbreak, using the vehicle

of a fictionalised account of the merchant's experience. Here a victim, albeit a fictional one, is allowed to speak, but only as the servant of a polemic. Incidentally, Brooks suggests that Defoe's account reveals loss of faith in the capacity of Baconian medical science to deal with the plague. This remark is of interest not only because it shows early skepticism about scientific claims to authority, but because it yet again demonstrates a feature of all true disasters - they make the best of human efforts to contain and control them seem insignificant.

The direct and devastating effects of disasters on populations is brought home by the photograph accompanying this introduction. This picture was taken by Yoshito Matsushige on August 6 1945, on the ground at Hiroshima, about three hours after the bomb had been dropped. (Lifton and Hosoe 1985:27-28). The photograph is grainy, scratched and indistinct, as might be expected considering the dreadful circumstances under which it was taken. There are other images of Hiroshima (Lifton and Hosoe 1985), more familiar and certainly technically far better pictures of the explosion itself and of the city where all had been flattened except for a domed building which had remained more or less intact. There are also the remarkable Hiroshima panels drawn by artists Iri and Toshi Maruki. These are a long series of drawings on panels, each about the size of a door, depicting the naked, contorted bodies of those writhing in the searing heat and suffocating gases of the nuclear explosion. These were exhibited widely in the West in the early 1950s to stunned audiences who had not at that stage grasped the full meaning of the Bomb (cf. Hinton 1989).

Matsushige's photograph stands out for two reasons. First it has the verisimilitude that only a photograph can carry, and second it invites reflection because it has a deceptive air of normalcy about it. Only the collapsed buildings in the background suggest that something is wrong. The people in the foreground could be vendors in a market, squatting by the road to attract the custom of the passer-by. But then one notes that they have no wares in front of them. They are simply sitting or reposing in an aimless fashion. They are making no effort to communicate with one another. To the right of the picture several people wander around. It is not clear if anyone is injured or not, but there can be little doubt that these *hibakusha* - explosion affected people - would have later succumbed to the 'radiation sickness'. The photographer made no effort to compose his picture, nor to allow for the fact that some of his subjects were moving. He must have been in as much a state of shock as the people whose image he captures, for he was no detached observer: he was a *hibakusha*, a man doomed to a lingering and painful death, himself. This knowledge adds to

#### 4 *Disasters: Images and Contexts*

the impact of the photograph even today, some forty seven years after the event.

The capacity of disasters to fuel the imagination has aroused the curiosity of many thinkers, amongst them Immanuel Velikovsky, who is best known for his book, *Worlds in Collision* (1950). Velikovsky argues that Earth had a near collision with the planet Venus - not in the far distant past known only to geologists and paleontologists - but in historical times. He claims that many of the stories of mass death and destruction in the Bible and other documents are not mythical, but are documentary accounts of mass trauma caused by the unusually close proximity of the other planet.

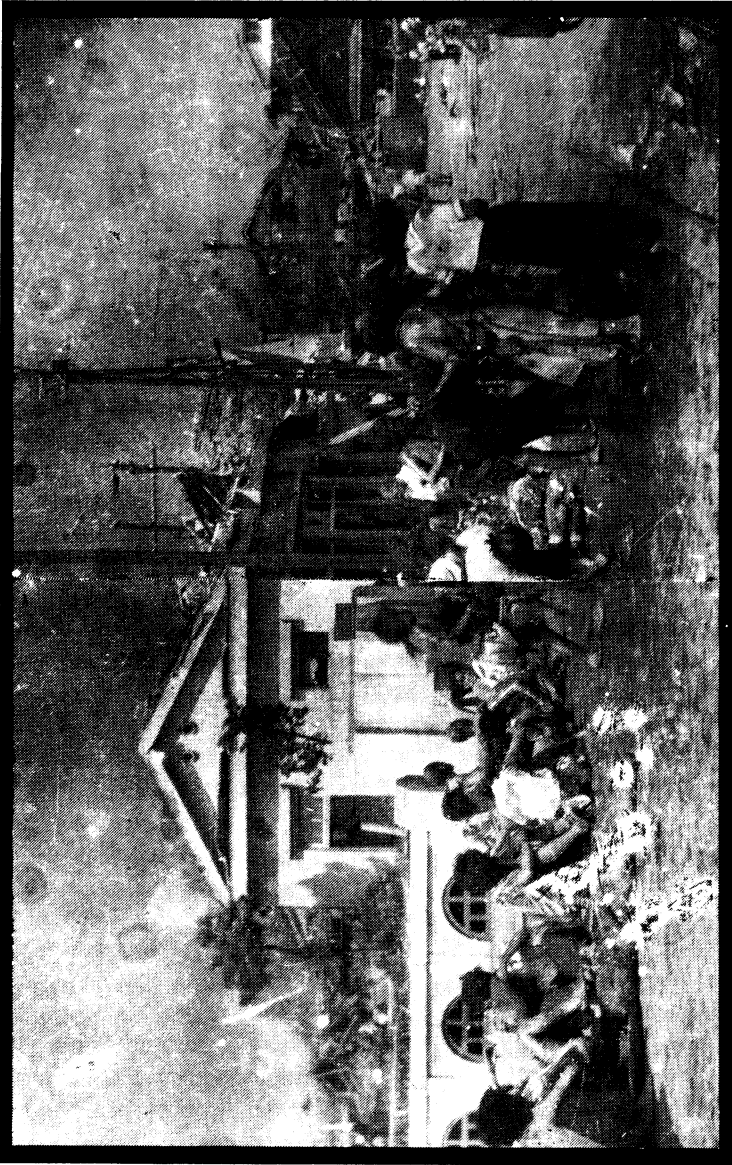
Velikovsky's claims prompted an onslaught of great vehemence by detractors, most of whom were scientists. Sustained efforts were even made to prevent the publication of *Worlds in Collision*. A number of books and a great many articles have been published arguing the merits of his claims (de Grazia 1966).

In his efforts to explain the determination of his critics, Velikovsky had what cynics might regard as the perfect rejoinder: he asserted that they were in the thrall of an archetypal fear, shared with the remainder of humanity and implanted in the collective psyche by the near planetary collision, but repressed because of its unbearable horror.

Velikovsky was a psychoanalyst with an essentially Jungian perspective. He developed his theme in a work which was published posthumously, *Mankind in Amnesia* (1982). In this he writes of 'racial memory', which is something embedded in the collective, rather than the individual, consciousness of humanity. 'Through a racial memory we can consider ourselves as having been present at some horrible cataclysmic scenes amid unchained elements, devastation by which no creature in the world . . . could conceivably have been unaffected. Thus the accumulation of the genetic mnemes comes down to every representative of the species . . . all ascendancy reaches back to the same generation that was exposed to the trauma' (1982:30).

He continues: 'the traumatic experiences that humans keep buried in oblivion possess enormous power over the destiny of nations. If the human race is not able to face its past, the traumatic experience that caused cultural amnesia will demand repetition - and since the atomic age began, humans have lived under the sword of Damocles' (1982:93).

Velikovsky believed that unless humanity fully acknowledged the force of these repressed 'racial memories' - as a patient under psychoanalysis relives the experiences of early childhood - we are bound to relive the archetypal disaster scenario by destroying ourselves with nuclear weapons.



Hiroshima, around 11.00a.m., April 6 1945, three hours after the atomic explosion

Photo by Yoshito Matsushige

Velikovsky's writings are themselves testimony to the power of disasters over the cultural imagination. Just as the thought of individual death can be the subject of the deepest contemplation - reflections on mortality are advocated by all major religions - so the prospect of collective obliteration is expressed in all manner of religious, scientific, literary and artistic productions. Eschatologies have also been transformed and diffused in ways which are more inspirational than fearful. They may thus promote new courage to 'be' rather than psychic paralysis and self destructive actions. Of course much depends upon what one regards as 'inspirational': the eschatology of Christian fundamentalists who preached that nuclear war between the US and Russia would presage the return of Jesus Christ to rule over the faithful, who would miraculously survive - a notion reputed to have had some influence over Ronald Reagan in the 1980s - does not represent a scenario one would wish to attain wide currency.

One example of the way in which a collective memory of disaster promoted decisive and effective action is Susan Baggett's account in this volume of a group of Australian farmers who drew upon images derived from the disastrous military defeat of the ANZACs at Gallipoli to fight a huge bushfire.

I have suggested that disasters almost inevitably figure in eschatological consciousness. An eschatology - a doctrine about the final end of things - is probably common to all religions. The Bible, for instance, begins with Genesis and ends with Revelations in which the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse ride and humanity feels the full force of God's wrath. John O. Ward documents in his paper a great variety of disasters, actual and prophesied, during the medieval period, and remarks that in recent times these have declined in frequency and colour. It may seem strange that during the epoch in which we now live - which must surely rival the era of the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Black Death in turbulence - there appears to be a decline in eschatological consciousness in the religious and literary texts. Yet science has also given us scope for the exercise of the eschatological imagination. The Bomb was one such contribution - one which has more recently been replaced with concern about ecological disasters, such as the greenhouse effect and proliferating toxic wastes. But in another way the ideas of rationality and science may have reduced the capacity of disasters to exercise our imagination for they have deluded us into believing that the human race is immortal, that we can handle any obstacle that nature - or our own miscalculations - might place in our way. The ultimate expression of this notion is the idea that if there is some impending ultimate catastrophe we need only fly off to some other astral body.

Disasters remind us of our ultimate vulnerability before overwhelming or unforeseen forces. They strike when we least expect them. The AIDS pandemic, the subject of Robert Ariss's paper in this volume, is a case in point. At a time when we had eliminated many of the major infectious diseases, when medical technology seemed triumphant, a plague as threatening as any historical epidemic has materialised.

On a much more local scale, this aspect of disasters is illustrated by a violent storm which recently struck one of Sydney's more salubrious areas, the upper North Shore. Many houses and gardens were destroyed by the shattering of the large gum trees which, in more normal conditions, provided shade and shelter. The residents had chosen the area not only because it was attractive, but because it have seemed so safe, far from the threat of flood, fire and storm which hangs over so many settled areas in Australia. Yet in the space of a mere twenty minutes - for that is as long as the storm lasted - there was not only great physical damage, but the residents' sense of security was destroyed. Those who lived through the storm will never again view the gathering of clouds for one of Sydney's regular summer thunderstorms without disquiet.

The paper by Anderson and Cotton is different from the others in this book because the authors were actively involved in counselling victims of a disaster, the recent earthquake at Newcastle. It shows clearly the complexity of the reactions of those affected: there is not only grave disquiet, but anger, blame of self and of others, loss of self esteem. The emotional wounds of disasters may remain long after the physical injuries have healed.

The North Shore storm raises the question of the relative scale of disasters. Is it reasonable to categorise this very local event which caused no deaths, with disasters like Hiroshima and the Great Plague which killed so many? For although the extent of the damage caused by the storm astonished those familiar with the usual extremes of Sydney weather, it is doubtful if it was reported outside Australia. I believe that it does have essentially similar features to greater disasters. These include the reminder of ultimate vulnerability, which I have discussed above; the fact that the storm destroyed a great deal of property; and the reasonable expectation that it will be long remembered and increasingly mythologised as memories are passed on. A similar observation may be made about the shipwrecks in colonial Australia discussed by Mark Staniforth in his contribution to this collection. The wrecks killed relatively few people, and destroyed comparatively little property, but they were remembered because they reminded the colonists how vulnerable they were in an isolated and hostile continent.

Man-made disasters frequently highlight deep fissures in the society in which they take place. Stuart Piggin's and Matthew Allen's contributions on mine disasters in two very different cultural settings are testimony to this. In both cases, tensions between mining companies and their workers reached crisis point after the explosion, which were attributed to managerial indifference. Industrial relations were adversely affected for years afterwards.

It is worth noting that some of the major disasters which have afflicted humankind have not been sudden and explosive - like the Hiroshima bomb or the Sydney storm - but have been slow and as inexorable as a steady drip of water on stone. AIDS is of this nature; if the disease is to be contained it will be so only in the long term, and only after many thousands more people have died painful deaths. The great epidemics of the Medieval and Dark Ages in Europe, discussed in this book by James Hatty and John Ward, are comparable. These epidemics killed truly phenomenal numbers of people - many more than the most destructive of explosive disasters like Krakatoa, Vesuvius or Hiroshima. Whole regions became depopulated and the populations of some major cities were halved. These can be described as disasters because of their uncontrollability, and because of the sheer levels of the mortality they inflicted. They were also disasters comparable to the more explosive and direct catastrophes because of the similar eschatological speculation they engendered amongst survivors. This will be evident to readers of this volume where Lola Sharon Davidson's paper in particular explores the way in which disasters - including the great epidemics - loomed large in the medieval consciousness.

In a celebrated phrase, Walter Benjamin (1973:25) wrote that to understand the past, we must develop the 'means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'. Disasters are such moments of danger, and the papers in this volume 'seize hold of' various disasters from the perspectives of several disciplines, seeking insights not only into the events themselves, but into the societies in which they occurred.

The papers in this volume were originally presented at a day long seminar entitled *Contextualizing Disasters*. The seminar was organized by the Sydney Association for the Study of Society and Culture (SASSC), an organisation within the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney. SASSC is intended to facilitate cross disciplinary communication, and has run a number of conferences and seminars over the past ten years on topics including feudalism, revolutions, gender issues and semiotics. It is appropriate for me to acknowledge here the assistance of Soumyen Mukherjee, founder and guiding hand of SASSC, who has not only contributed the Afterword to this collection, but who provided advice and encouragement at the time of the seminar, and during the preparation of this volume.

The seminar was held in conjunction with a large conference run by the Australian Institution of Engineers in March 1991. The engineers' conference was entitled *Australian Disaster Response; How Good?* (Lessels 1991) The collaboration of our two organisations was arranged after the convener of the engineer's conference, John Lessels, learnt that we were planning a disaster conference at about the same time as the Institution of Engineers. We were generously invited to share the well appointed facilities at the Darling Harbour Convention Centre.

The Institution of Engineers' conference catered for disaster response planners and hazards experts. It included civil servants, politicians, military, police, fire fighting personnel as well as experts in appropriate engineering and scientific fields. It focussed entirely on floods and earthquakes. In our Seminar, however, the historians, sociologists, students of literature and anthropologists who participated were invited to present papers on any of the considerable range of phenomena which might reasonably be called disasters. As a glance at the table of contents will show, these included both man-made and natural disasters, floods, fires, earthquakes, mine explosions, epidemics, shipwrecks and military defeats. Our participants were not restricted to particular cultural settings or historical eras. Papers covered events ranging from contemporary Japan to colonial Australia; to medieval Europe and present day outback Australia.

The very different perspectives on disasters in the two meetings were reminiscent of the Two Cultures identified by C.P. Snow: there were the scientists on the one hand and the literary intellectuals on the other. Snow wrote of the schism between them: members of the Two Cultures were 'comparable in intelligence, identical in race, not grossly different in social origin, earning about the same income, (but) had almost ceased to communicate at all' (Snow 1959:2).

I think it is fair to say that this communications gap still exists, although there are increasing efforts by some on both sides to build bridges. Thus we



I think it is fair to say that this communications gap still exists, although there are increasing efforts by some on both sides to build bridges. Thus we were not only invited to share a forum with the engineers, but I was asked to write a foreword to the published proceedings of their conference (Hinton 1991). It is my hope that the present collection of papers will, while being of interest to a scholarly audience, be itself a modest exercise in bridge building.

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