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Introduction

British Responses to the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear Disaster

By Peter Matanle

School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield

p.matanle@sheffield.ac.uk

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Introduction

British Responses to the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear Disaster

Dr Peter Matanle

Senior Lecturer, School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield

p.matanle@sheffield.ac.uk

In the 21st century disasters have become international events, with repercussions that stretch far from their immediate environs. They are also complex, with multiple intersecting origins and causes producing outcomes that both ripple outwards as well as cascade down the generations. Five years have now passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake on 11 March 2011 generated a massive tsunami that inundated the coast of eastern Tōhoku in Japan, destroying whole communities as it swept over the land, and which triggered the crisis at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear power plant. The following three essays are personal accounts of British responses to those events. They are intended to commemorate those events from five years ago and provide a vivid snapshot of how British people and organisations were touched by and responded to the disasters.

All three essays are written from the perspectives of the individuals themselves in an informal style in the first person, drawing on diaries, papers, notes, emails, social media, photographs, and personal memories in recounting their involvement. By combining these essays together, we aim to contribute to academic and practitioner knowledge of international responses to complex disasters. Each account relates the dilemmas and decisions that the individuals went through at the time and which are pieced together into a personal experiential narrative. What responsibilities do the representatives of foreign governments have when disasters occur? How do they ensure the safety and security of their countries' citizens overseas while maintaining good relations with the host country's government and assisting in the broader rescue and recovery operation? How do organisations and institutions with operations in countries touched by disaster make sure that their personnel – be they managers, employees, or students - are accounted for and able to decide what is in their best interests in potentially hazardous situations? And how do academics located in or near disaster areas decide whether to stay and help, and whether and how to incorporate the events into their research?

Sir David Warren was British Ambassador to Japan at the time of the disaster. He led the British Embassy's response on the ground in Japan and his account forms the cornerstone of our submission. His position as Ambassador gives readers a unique insight into the unfolding disaster and the demands that are made on senior government officials at these moments. Dr Thomas McAuley was in the UK when the disaster occurred, and his task was to coordinate and implement the University of Sheffield's response. I was spending one year of research leave in Kyoto as Director of the Sheffield-Doshisha Centre. Although our positions, tasks and responses differ in scale, responsibility and content, together they demonstrate the degree to which disasters in the 21st century have indeed become complex international events.

It is important to remember that all three of us survived the earthquake and tsunami that struck the Tōhoku region on 11 March 2011. Yet, 15,894 people have died, 6,152 were injured, and 2,562 people remain missing as of 10 February 2016. With these three accounts we can never represent the losses that so many people endured. Nevertheless, we hope that in some small way our stories

can help others to understand what happened to the Tōhoku region and Japan on 11 March 2011, and in so doing assist responses to disasters in the future.