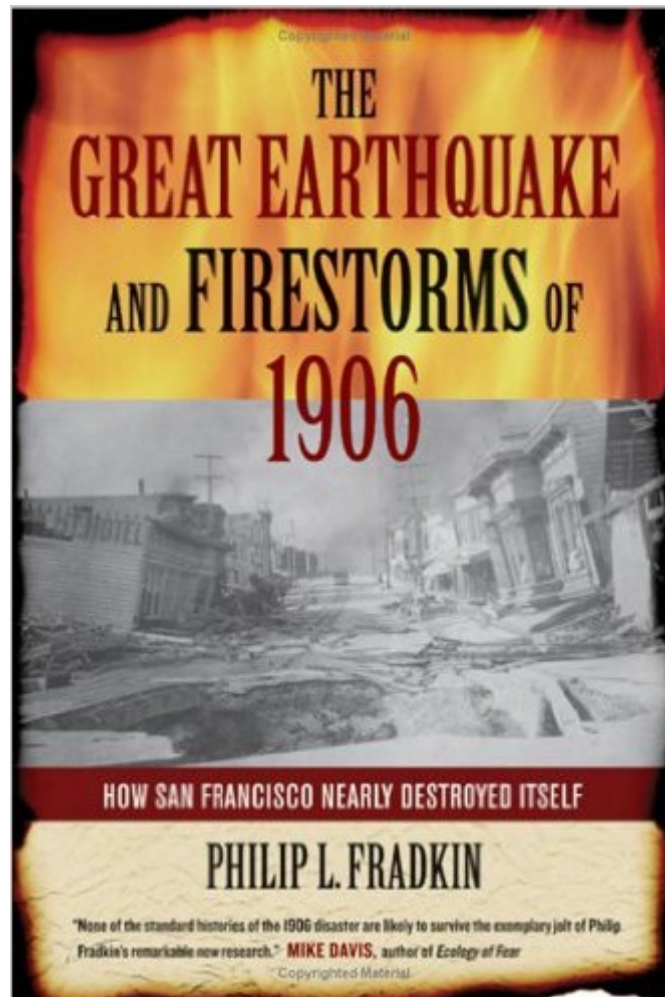


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The Great Earthquake And Firestorms Of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself



Synopsis

The first indication of the prolonged terror that followed the 1906 earthquake occurred when a ship steaming off San Francisco's Golden Gate seemed to jump clear out of the water. This gripping account of the earthquake, the devastating firestorms that followed, and the city's subsequent reconstruction vividly shows how, after the shaking stopped, humans, not the forces of nature, nearly destroyed San Francisco in a remarkable display of simple ineptitude and power politics. Bolstered by previously unpublished eyewitness accounts and photographs, this definitive history of a fascinating city caught in the grip of the country's greatest urban disaster will forever change conventional understanding of an event one historian called "the very epitome of bigness." Philip Fradkin takes us onto the city's ruptured streets and into its exclusive clubs, teeming hospitals and refugee camps, and its Chinatown. He introduces the people; both famous and infamous; who experienced these events, such as Jack and Charmian London, Enrico Caruso, James Phelan, and Abraham Ruef. He traces the horrifying results of the mayor's illegal order to shoot-to-kill anyone suspected of a crime, and he uncovers the ugliness of racism that almost led to war with Japan. He reveals how an elite oligarchy failed to serve the needs of ordinary people, the heroic efforts of obscure citizens, the long-lasting psychological effects, and how all these events ushered in a period of unparalleled civic upheaval. This compelling look at how people and institutions function in great catastrophes demonstrates just how deeply earthquake, fires, hurricanes, floods, wars, droughts, or acts of terrorism can shape us.

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Customer Reviews

It seems we are all doomed to repeat history whether we learn from the past or not. I started reading *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906* a few days before Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. As a native Northern Californian who has experienced many earthquakes including the Loma Prieta Quake of 1989 (in which a portion of the Bay Bridge and a freeway overpass in Oakland collapsed), I found that the first part of the book made me recall my own experiences and wonder uneasily what I would do when the next catastrophic quake strikes. By the time I finished the book, all I could think about were the similarities to the 2005 hurricane and its aftermath. Author Philip Fradkin states right away that "San Franciscans, not the inanimate forces of nature, were primarily responsible for the extensive chaos, damage, injuries, and deaths in the great earthquake and firestorms of 1906. Despite ... warnings, they were dismissive of the past and failed to prepare for the future. During the earthquake and fire, military and civilian officials reacted foolishly under great duress." One aspect of both tragedies that seemed to strike a chord with many people was the reporting of widespread looting. While people were still stranded on their roofs or trapped in flooded hospitals and nursing homes in New Orleans in 2005, and while the fires raged in San Francisco and people were without shelter and water in 1906, many officials could only focus on the theft of personal property. Mayor Schmitz of San Francisco illegally issued military, police, and civilian deputies to shoot looters on sight. In San Jose, the mayor announced looters would be hanged.

I have nearly a complete degree in geology and one of my favorite topics was earthquakes and volcanoes. Like most individuals who enjoy studying this subject, the earthquake of 1906 is a must since it is one of the most heavily documented, particularly in photographic history, of any such event. I've read a number of books on the San Francisco quake, but this has got to be the best of its kind. The author spent some time working through the material evidence that has been kept in libraries since the event in order to recreate a thorough account of the earthquake, as much a human event as a geological one. While many works on the 1906 earthquake cover the impressions of famous people present during the disaster—Barrymore, Caruso and others—and describe the deaths and the firestorms, few cover the details of the political situation before and after the earthquake and the denial mentality that worked to create this disaster and in fact that of the 1980s quake—and will probably pave the way to the disaster of the next one as well. The earthquake was downplayed to the point where the question was "what earthquake? We don't have earthquakes here," while the firestorm which occurred after it as a result of broken gas mains and power lines in the presence of a failed water distribution system was emphasized. After all, everyone has fires, and measures can be taken to prevent them. Nothing can be done about earthquakes, even their

prediction remains elusive. Unfortunately the efforts of commercial and financial interests in restoring the areas' reputation as a good investment site competitive with neighboring cities in the area, contributed extensively to the boom that put San Francisco on the map again so soon.

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