



***Living on Shaky Ground: The science and story behind New Zealand's earthquakes***  
by Matthew Wright.  
Auckland: Random House (2014). RRP: \$49.99. Sb, 240pp.  
ISBN: 9781775536888.  
Reviewed by Matthew Hughes.

and Wright makes the important point that in our social media age this disaster has been made especially immediate and visceral.

My quibble about the scientific figures notwithstanding, *Living on Shaky Ground* is an attractive book and the text is amply supported by fascinating historical paintings and photographs. It is a welcome resource that will remind a lay audience of the important if sometimes forgotten role earthquakes have played in the story of New Zealand.

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In *Living on Shaky Ground*, Matthew Wright, a prolific writer of military and social histories, weaves together scientific and social strands to explore how earthquakes have impacted New Zealand's historical evolution. Wright focuses on 'pivotal events' that reveal the nature of the risks we face and the human responses to disaster.

The first chapter is an adequate if occasionally overwrought summary of the development of earthquake science from antiquity to the modern day. That said, the text is poorly served by the accompanying figures which could have been reduced in number and improved in quality with better labelling. A map showing New Zealand's major geological faults would have been a useful addition. Wright does, however, present a good summary of the Modified Mercalli Scale which describes felt earthquake intensity and degree of observed damage, and he usefully refers to this throughout the book.

Following a chapter on earthquakes in New Zealand's prehistory, there is a series of chapters giving overviews of major earthquakes in the nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Each of these is followed by a chapter that looks more in-depth at key events which had significant regional and national impacts: 1855 Wellington, 1931 Napier and 2010-2011 Canterbury. It is in the recounting of the 1855 and 1931 events that Wright's skill as a historian shines, and I found these the most gripping parts of the book. Given our recent experiences in Christchurch, reading the tragedy of Napier was especially poignant. In particular, the contemporary observations of returned World War One servicemen – that the destruction was similar to what they witnessed in Europe – and these make for an unsettling connection to that other national calamity. The Christchurch chapter is a good summary of events,