

The Great Kanto Earthquake and F. Scott Fitzgerald

How many recall the following striking sentence from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, which appears on the second page of the novel, where Fitzgerald first introduces Gatsby?

"If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away"

This line may have failed to focus our attention when we first read the book in our younger days. Now, however, as a Japanese seismologist and an American geophysicist (and student of Japanese culture), we would be greatly remiss for failing to take greater note of this statement. Indeed, as *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925, it occurred to us that the earthquake Fitzgerald might have been thinking of was the Great Kanto earth-

quake, which occurred on September 1, 1923 and devastated the Tokyo metropolitan area.

The Great Gatsby is a story about people in Long Island, New York. The distance between the epicenter of the Kanto earthquake and Long Island is about 10,000 km. From on-line biographical materials on Fitzgerald compiled by the Thomas Cooper Library of the University of South Carolina in honor of the 1996 centenary of his birth (<http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/chronology.html>), we know that he was in New York when the Great Kanto earthquake struck. A subsequent chronology is as follows:

- Mid-October 1922–April 1924: Fitzgeralds rent house at 6 Gateway Drive in Great Neck, Long Island.
- Mid-April 1924: Fitzgeralds sail for France.
- May 1924: Fitzgeralds visit Paris, then leave for The Riviera; stop at Grimm's Park Hotel in Hyeres and settle in June at Villa Marie Valescure, St. Raphael.
- Summer–Autumn 1924: FSF writes *The Great Gatsby*.

The front page of *The New York Times* of September 2, 1923, carried a headline about the earthquake, along with several stories about various aspects of the disaster. On page 2, a boxed item with the following title appeared: "Japanese Earthquake Recorded Across the World From Hawaii to London by Observatory Instruments." (see left) This item tells how the earthquake was recorded on seismographs in Hilo, Hawaii; Berkeley, Calif.; Washington, D.C.; and West Bromwich, England. It seems likely that Fitzgerald read this item that Sunday morning, and that this was the inspiration for his striking sentence.

It is startling to reflect that seismographs were installed all over the world 80 years ago and that their recordings, reported in the next morning's newspaper, became an inspiration for a great novelist. We cannot help admiring our predecessors, and perhaps providing such inspiration to the world beyond the geophysical community should be considered

one of our challenges today as well. Indeed, it might be of general interest to investigate the various roles played by geophysical events in the literary realm. At least it was inspiring for us to uncover the likely link between the Great Kanto Earthquake and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Acknowledgments

The book *Honyaku Yawa* by Haruki Murakami and Motoyuki Shibata was our inspiration for examining *The Great Gatsby* anew.

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Japanese Earthquake Recorded Across the World From Hawaii to London by Observatory Instruments

HILO, Hawaii, Sept. 1 (Associated Press).—The seismograph at Kealahou at 7 o'clock last night registered a severe distant earthquake.

Sampans in the harbor were warned to beware of a tidal wave. Reports received here said a slight tidal wave was noticed at the Island of Puna, off the coast of Ecuador. No damage was reported.

BERKELEY, Cal., Sept. 1.—The seismograph of the University of California recorded a "very severe" earthquake starting at 10 minutes and 18 seconds after 7 o'clock last night and lasting for three hours and fifty minutes. The indicated distance was 5,400 miles and the point of origin in the region between Tokio and Osaka, Japan.

WASHINGTON, Sept. 1.—An earthquake described as extremely severe and continuing nearly five hours last night and early today was recorded on the Georgetown University seismograph. Beginning at 10:12 P. M., the disturbance reached a maximum intensity between 10:30 and 11 o'clock, and lasted until 3 A. M. Director Tondorf of the observatory estimated the centre of the disturbance at about 6,300 miles from Washington.

WEST BROMWICH, England, Sept. 1 (Associated Press).—An exceptionally severe earthquake shock was recorded at the observatory here at about 4:11 this morning.

The seismograph indicated that the origin of the tremors was 5,500 miles distant from here. The movement was sufficiently strong to ring an alarm bell and disarrange the mechanism of the recording instrument.