

R.L. Wettenhall. *Bushfire Disaster: An Australian Community in Crisis*. Sydney, Australia: Angus & Robertson, 1975, 320 pp. \$12.95.

This is a welcome addition to disaster literature. Its primary contribution is a case study analysis of a firestorm which swept Southern Tasmania in February 1967, killing 63, destroying over 1,300 homes and causing damage estimated to be over \$40 million. The author, R.L. Wettenhall, now Head of the School of Administrative Studies at the Canberra College of Education, was at the time a reader in Political Science at the University of Tasmania. He became a "volunteer" during the emergency when fire threatened his suburban Hobart home. With his knowledge and interest in governmental processes, his participation led him to question how Australian social organization would respond to such stress. This led to his "discovery" of disaster research literature which he summarizes in the first section of the book, along with review of the disaster history of Australia. He prefaces the case study with a discussion of the nature of disaster planning and preparedness in Australia at the time of the fire. He points out the persistent tendency on the part of planners to see disaster as an engineering problem rather than a sociological one.

The major portion of the book constitutes the case study of the organizational involvement during the primary emergency (rescue), secondary emergency (remedy), and the longer term recovery. Much of the theoretical orienta-

tion of the case study relies on the interplay between established governmental and non-governmental agencies and emergent groups during these phases. He also considers the larger political context in which this interaction took place. He suggests that existing organizations were most effective during the rescue phase and during the longer term recovery, but their inability to handle the secondary emergency phase led to the development of emergent groups. Much of this theory was based on work done on emergent groups at the Disaster Research Center.

In particular, he focuses on the organizational implications of differing conceptions of post-disaster assistance, more specifically on differences between a more traditional-restorative case work approach and a more aggressive case finding approach, sometimes advocated by more aggressive caseworkers. The latter approach often seems more plausible, given the uncertainty of the emergency period, and given the lack of prior disaster experience within the community. This difference in approaches is not unique to this particular situation; it is currently becoming an important issue in disaster policy in the United States with the recent interest and involvement of community mental health groups in disaster problems.

The author has some interesting observations as to the personality types which come to dominate emergent groups. He suggests that their very success in the emergency period often reflects their inability to deal with more routinized situations. After the community moves back to more routinized situations in the recovery period, such emergent leaders interpret this to mean that others have not appreciated their prior "heroic" efforts. Subsequently they withdraw from the scene.

The book ends with a plea for more systematic disaster research in Australia and for greater attention to disaster planning on the part of the government. Some changes in government policy were made, subsequent to the Hobart experience. Ironically, the book was in press at the time of the Darwin cyclone when the "new" National Disaster Organization was in operation for the first time. One would hope that the Darwin disaster would provide the next

opportunity for cumulative disaster research and for the testing of governmental planning efforts. In the future, one might be able to look back at this book and cite it as the initial step in systematic disaster research in Australia, much in the same fashion one can look back that Samuel Prince's study of Halifax in 1920 as a starting point for research in North America. It is also significant that the book was published as a part of a series of publications on Australian society. This suggests that to study disaster is as legitimate and perhaps as theoretically productive as studying the community, the stratification system or ethnic relations. In any case, Wettenhall's book is relevant both to social science theory as well as to governmental policy. That's a hard combination to get these days.

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