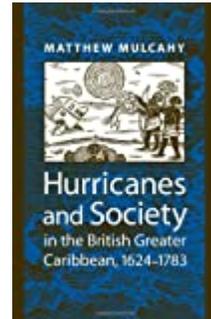




Matthew Mulcahy. *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. ix + 257 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8223-4.



Reviewed by Michael Guasco (Department of History, Davidson College)

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Let's Talk About the Weather

Considering the nature of his characterization of Anglo-Jamaican creoles in his 1774 *History of Jamaica*, it almost seems as if Edward Long preferred to forget his family's intimate ties to Britain's most important sugar island. Edward's father was Jamaican-born and his great-grandfather Samuel was an influential, if controversial, leader of the Jamaica Assembly, beginning in the 1660s. Edward, however, had been born in Cornwall in 1734 and, as such, he could hide his colonial roots if he wished to do so. Upon the death of his father in 1757, Edward assumed his patrimony and sailed to Jamaica to run the family plantation and, eventually, rose to some import in local politics. Nonetheless, after twelve years, Edward returned to England where he lived out the rest of his life. Edward Long was therefore well placed to comment on the inhabitants of Jamaica, many of the most prominent of whom were his relations either by birth or marriage. It is a bit surprising, then, that Long chose to emphasize that, "the Creoles have foibles in their disposition." In particular, Long noted that Anglo-Jamaicans suffered from "indolence in their affairs, which renders them bad oeconomists." Moreover, they possessed "a strong natural propensity to the other sex," which meant

that, "they are not always the most chaste and faithful of husbands." Additionally, Anglo-Jamaicans "are liable to sudden transports of anger; but these fits, like hurricanes, though violent while they last, are soon over and subside into a calm." [1]

If Matthew Mulcahy is to be believed in his new book, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783*, Long's invocation of the hurricane metaphor was loaded language indicative of a cultural divide that separated many Anglo-Americans from their British cousins back home. To be sure, historians have long been familiar with the idea that the climate affected the way Englishmen promoted and engaged in colonial enterprises. Hurricanes, Mulcahy informs us, were exceptionally important for several reasons. First, they were concentrated in a specific part of Anglo-America (Mulcahy's "Greater Caribbean" includes the lower mainland colonies of Georgia and South Carolina) and therefore had regionally specific ramifications. Second, hurricanes, unlike other more general woes, were episodic and unpredictable but no less endemic. They were, therefore, something that all British settlers were forced to confront

in a way that made the heat and humidity of the region seem like minor inconveniences. Finally, hurricanes (as recent events have made abundantly clear) had long-term social and economic consequences; these fabulous storms may have lasted for a just a few days or even hours, but their consequences could be felt for years. Hurricanes therefore “shaped the mental and physical worlds of colonists during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” in ways that challenged deeply held beliefs about the ability of Britons to transform the New World and conditioned the way British Americans thought about their place in the larger Atlantic world (p. 4).

Hurricanes and Society consists of seven core chapters that read a bit like discrete essays in which hurricanes are a premise to explore a set of seemingly loosely related issues. Mulcahy begins, appropriately, with the English colonists’ first encounters with hurricanes, a defining event that “as much as any other factor shaped colonists’ perceptions and fears about the physical environment” (p. 11). While the storms were terrifying events in themselves, however, Mulcahy is more interested in the relationship between English culture and the American environment. Early English colonialism was often predicated on the assumption that settlers “could ‘improve’ nature” (p. 26). By planting gardens, and building houses and fences, Englishmen both established sovereignty and transformed the wilderness. Quickly, and definitively, hurricanes “destroyed the symbolic markers of English culture and the social order” and confident settlers often found themselves reduced to living in a virtual state of nature (p. 29).

Just as violent winds and rains shaped the way Englishmen (and in this book Mulcahy is usually considering men) thought about the natural world, nature’s fury forced them to think about God’s role in these events. As Mulcahy argues, “providentialism provided the initial lens through which colonists to the Greater Caribbean viewed the new and ‘strange’ storms they encountered in the early decades of the seventeenth century” (p. 37). In this regard, although Mulcahy does not press the point, early colonists were not so different from the Caribs, who also saw evidence of the supernatural in hurricanes. As the century wore on, however, Englishmen grew more confident that the explanation for hurricanes was more likely to be found in natural process and environmental considerations. Ironically, among the several reasons for the development of more sophisticated ways of thinking about hurricanes was greater appreciation of the ability of indigenous peoples to predict and endure the storms.

The relationship between hurricanes and the plantation economy comes in for fuller treatment in the middle chapters of the book, where Mulcahy addresses the complications hurricanes presented for sugar planters in the Caribbean and rice planters in the lower southern mainland colonies. Hurricanes could devastate an entire year’s crops and ruin planters. Buildings were destroyed and trade disrupted. Enslaved workers often perished in large numbers; records from Barbados in the wake of the 1780 hurricane indicate that more than two thousand slaves died in the immediate aftermath and still more in the long run. Mulcahy suggests, then, that hurricanes contributed to the consolidation of sugar plantations into the hands of the few during the eighteenth century; enhanced the role played by creditors and insurance providers in the Atlantic economy; helped determined the (re)construction of towns and buildings; and may even have been an important consideration in the high rates of absenteeism among West Indian planters. So too did they feed into planters’ fears that enslaved peoples might use the chaos and instability created by the storms to rebel, or that foreign powers might take the opportunity to attack their unsuspecting neighbors. Fear, paranoia even, was built into the structure of every society with slaves, but the slave societies of the Greater Caribbean, with their stark African majorities, were only tenuously controlled by whites in the best of times. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the same devastation wrought upon whites invariably muted the possibility for rebellion among Africans (and similarly paralyzed other European powers in the region as much as they did the English) and there is no record of either a slave rebellion or foreign invasion in British America as a result of one of these storms.

The final two chapters of the book are an interesting consideration of the nature of the British Atlantic community during the second half of the eighteenth century as measured, in part, by disaster relief. Here Mulcahy is less interested in the hurricanes themselves than he is in the way a given transatlantic crisis “highlights an important shift in attitudes among Britons about their fellow subjects in the colonies” (p. 151). Mulcahy makes the pointed argument in this section that the charitable response of the British public to the hardships suffered by their transatlantic cousins is indicative of the emergence of a larger community “with shared social, economic, and political interests” (p. 153). Of course, in light of the difficulties of the revolutionary era, government aid also made political sense and Parliament “used disaster relief to reaffirm the connection between Britain

and the West Indian colonies, and to deflect criticism that British officials were inattentive to the needs of colonists” (p. 173). How funds were distributed in the colonies, particularly in Jamaica, also comes under study here—one of the few places in the book where socio-economic differences within the colonies are given fuller treatment.

Matthew Mulcahy’s intriguing book is premised on a set of well-articulated questions and themes, and he is careful (perhaps too much so) not to push his conclusions too far. He is not really prepared in this book to claim, for example, that hurricanes caused any one thing in particular, merely that they colored the political, economic, and social climate of the Greater Caribbean. Thus, we learn that, while hurricanes made planters worry about slave uprisings and foreign invasion, none ever happened as a result of a devastating storm. And while we learn that hurricanes did “shape the experience of plantership,” we are also told that they “did not alter the fundamental structure of the plantation economy” (pp. 67, 92). And where Mulcahy does begin to consider important long-term transformations, he is often considering issues such as public charity and its relation to the emergence of a coherent transatlantic British American community, or the emergence of more reasonable, scientific explanations for environmental phenomena in the eighteenth century, that could be explored without any reference to hurricanes at all.

Mulcahy is to be generally applauded for leaving his reader wanting more, yet at the same time it would have been preferable if he had followed through more fully with some of the lines of inquiry he establishes but does not necessarily pursue. He often introduces tantalizing evidence for the intersection of indigenous and European vernacular cultures in this book, but leaves it to readers to extrapolate any possible significance. He considers both the subject of slavery and providentialism, but hesitates to make too much of either subject individually or together because of the limited nature of the evidence. Yet, there were places where evidence clearly exists—religious and anti-slavery literature in the late eighteenth century come to mind—of which important questions could have been asked. For example, I was left wondering whether or not the storms were ever used by anti-slavery advocates in the eighteenth century as evidence of a new kind of divine judgment. Certainly sermons survive from the

1690s to suggest that the earthquake that destroyed Port Royal in 1692 represented a kind of spiritual intervention. Thus, even though a great deal of scholarship in this book is concerned with the 1780s, anti-slavery appears to be a subject tabled for another time.

Finally, there is the case of Edward Long with which this review began. Creolization is obviously an important subject to Mulcahy and one of his most compelling arguments in the book would suggest that hurricanes were increasingly imagined as collective imperial crises rather than regional peculiarities. At the same time, there is also a great deal of evidence to suggest the emergence of a distinctively creolized American identity by the end of the eighteenth century, especially in the slave societies of the Greater Caribbean. The environment generally, and hurricanes specifically, clearly contributed to this development. But if hurricanes helped define life in the Caribbean in the colonial era, if they contributed to the way British Americans like Edward Long thought about the distinctiveness of colonial Americans (though not necessarily himself), what are we to make of that in light of Mulcahy’s interest in the apparently simultaneous emergence of a transatlantic British community? Mulcahy’s unwillingness to pursue this issue, and others noted previously, in a more thoroughgoing fashion was almost certainly based on editorial and publishing considerations, but it also strikes me as indicative of what is too often a tepid approach to a tempestuous topic.

Hurricanes and Society is a useful and often intriguing consideration of the development of a British Atlantic world. Hurricanes themselves often recede into the background in this work and more questions are asked than answered. Yet Mulcahy has done an admirable job here in placing environmental considerations at the heart of his analysis; in prodding his readers to think a bit differently about geographic conventions; and in revealing the complex interplay among an array of topics. While I am not sure, therefore, if this is an exemplary book about hurricanes, it is certainly a thoughtful consideration of all sorts of issues at the heart of early British American history.

Note

[1]. All quotations from Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, vol. 2 (London, 1774), p. 265.

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