

Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624–1783. *By Matthew Mulcahy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. ix + 257 pp. Illustrations, figures, tables, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-8018-8223-0.

Reviewed by James Alexander Dun

To paraphrase the age-old imponderable about trees falling unnoticed in a forest, if a hurricane wreaked its havoc where no one could witness it, would it still be a hurricane? While meteorologists might say yes, historian Matthew Mulcahy suggests the opposite. In this lucidly written and cogently organized monograph, he argues that the destruction wrought by hurricanes only acquires meaning in the context of the community that experienced it. With this as his premise, Mulcahy establishes these storms as valuable windows onto the places they buffeted—windows he then peers through to chart the ways in which hurricanes were experienced, processed, and made sense of by Englishmen in the New World between the early part of the seventeenth century and the end of the American Revolution. To a certain degree, hurricanes define the boundaries of this study. Mulcahy presents the North American mainland colonies of South Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida as having much in common with those in the British West Indies, which allows him to cast the entire lot as a singular “British Greater Caribbean.” This formulation nicely complicates narratives that prefigure the United States and, in general, fits well with current trends in Atlantic history.

Hurricanes provided awesome proof of the newness of the New World. To be sure, the storms posed literal challenges to colonists’ endeavors, but Mulcahy shows how the figurative dilemmas they created were equally unsettling. Hurricanes’ theretofore unimaginable power conditioned the English experience of the Americas, typifying its wild, unknown, and savage connotations. Their destructive capacities erased English markers of progress against this wilderness, as the winds and floods undid years’ worth of “civilizing” efforts and “improvements” in one fell swoop. These setbacks called into question colonists’ capacities to control, settle on, and succeed in this landscape. It also, however, linked the various colonies together and began to separate them from the metropolis. This is the central tension in Mulcahy’s work. Hurricanes allowed colonists

at once to evoke their Englishness and to stress their American context. As quintessential expressions of that context, the storms moved from being understood as aberrances, or perhaps as acts of specific providential punishment, to being seen as predictable, or as signs of God's sublime power and purpose. In becoming "natural," hurricanes served as sites in which English forms—fast days, scriptural interpretations, scientific ideas, architectural styles—were bent and tempered by American realities. At other points, the disruptions hurricanes created stressed the exceptional features of American colonial society. Readers of this journal will be particularly interested in Mulcahy's consideration of the role hurricanes played in the growth of the plantation economy. Their damage slowed but never stopped the drive toward the dominance of sugar and rice exportation, and, in fact, led to the increasing consolidation of holdings. So too did the storms contribute to the rise of absentee ownership, as planters' credit was often strained beyond the breaking point by the disruptions the gales produced. By jeopardizing masters' confidence in their pose of omnipotence and their ability to cow their slaves into submission, these same disruptions emphasized the ideological basis of the slave system, even as they complicated them in practice.

The Anglo-American identity that Mulcahy establishes as having been "both promoted and reflected" (p. 164) by colonists' experience with hurricanes in the New World achieved some stability by the middle of the eighteenth century. In two final chapters, Mulcahy shows how colonists, as Britons seeking hurricane relief from the home government, understood themselves as having a distinctive position and role within the larger Empire. This role was recognized, for example, in Parliament's unprecedented grant of funds to Barbados and Jamaica after the hurricanes of October 1780. Even as he demonstrates the fissures within white society that were revealed by the intracolony struggles over how the money would be disbursed, Mulcahy here shows a fundamental integration of the British Caribbean into imperial political and social structures.

The fresh and provocative perspective Mulcahy provides in this work inevitably generates questions. For one, the relative agency of hurricanes in creating (or deferring) the developments Mulcahy discerns is hard to assess. These "windows" aren't passive, but how to characterize their impact? The development of plantation slavery, for example, seemingly would have happened in a less violent climate. For all their might,

hurricanes could not counteract the profit motive. While the storms' seasonality intensified the pace of production, it isn't clear that the drive to maximize efficiency would not have accomplished the same thing. Similarly, given the problems the storms created, it seems that planters should have resisted the development of the commission system and the resulting credit problems it produced. When and why did hurricanes emerge as primary conditioning factors? When were they less important than other elements ("natural" and otherwise) that confronted colonists?

A second question derives from the book's source base. Mulcahy's observation that—rather than acting as an impetus for rebellion, the storms subjected slaves to longer hours, more arduous work, malnutrition, disease, and death—is fascinating. That he doesn't consider slaves' looting to be resistance, however, suggests too narrow a definition of black politics. Furthermore, the relatively minor presence of African or Native American ideas about hurricanes calls into question the totality of the picture Mulcahy supplies. The Anglo-American identity he establishes was surely in dialogue with a wider Creole consciousness that was forged as Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans met, clashed, and coupled in the New World. Conclusions taking this wider perspective into account would necessarily have been more tenuous, given the evidentiary difficulties, but they would have given a new depth to Mulcahy's depiction of the Americas as a cultural space.

Finally, though this work embraces the Atlantic perspective, it does not do so to destabilize the nation-state as the dominant unit of historical analysis. Indeed, this story ends with the fragmentation of the British Empire and the creation of the United States. It would have been interesting to compare the experience of hurricanes that Mulcahy uncovers with that of French, Spanish, or Dutch colonials. These storms, after all, like slavery, cash-crop agriculture, and the imperial project itself, were transnational phenomena. To limit the story of their impact to the Anglophone areas of the hemisphere seems somewhat artificial.

To criticize this fine monograph too much along these lines, however, would be to castigate it for being a different book than the one the author set out to write. *Hurricanes and Society* is a wonderful read and a stimulating piece of scholarship.

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