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Reseña de “Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783” de Matthew Mulcahy
Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
San Juan, Puerto Rico

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=39215017015
lection, ties between the Caribbean Islands and Central America are mentioned only in Stubbs’ final chapter, and are missing altogether from the chapters on the Anglophone Caribbean.

But Sutton’s mission, of course, was not to create an exhaustive, regional collection but to point a way forward, provide an assessment of how far the field has come, and to pay tribute to the large footprint O. Nigel Bolland has left in the field of Caribbean labor studies. The collection hits this mark squarely. A pleasure to read, this book deserves a place on the shelves of labor history scholars, whether they are working in the Caribbean or in borderlands of the U.S. and Latin America. Sutton is to be credited with creating a welcome book that breathes new life into the study of labor, and which underscores how just how vibrant and exciting the field of Caribbean labor studies remains.

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When colonial hurricane victims ventured out of doors after the winds subsided, they described familiar worlds in a state of “strange havoc” (p. 2). It is this “havoc,” the impact of natural disasters on human lives and endeavors, that Matthew Mulcahy uses as an effective focusing device to describe the vulnerabilities and the resilience of Britain’s American plantation societies.

Hurricanes plied a zone of destruction that was no respecter of conventional definitions of region. As storms gathered power in tropical waters and were put into motion by Caribbean winds and currents, hurricanes surged across West Indian islands and pummeled the coastlines of southeastern North America. Shared risks defied a clean division between British colonies on the mainland and those in the West Indies. Mulcahy makes use of the idea of a “British Greater Caribbean” to let the natural range of hurricanes themselves deter-
mine the geographic boundaries of his study. He further emphasizes the impact of hurricanes on three colonies, Barbados, Jamaica, and South Carolina. Others have traced the long-standing connections between Barbados and South Carolina and, more generally, the intensifying trade between the mainland and the islands that provided enslaved sugar workers with their daily rations of corn, fish, and rice. The British Greater Caribbean is an artificial regional category that contemporaries themselves did not use, and, as such, it sometimes rings false. By asserting a unity in the disasters colonists confronted, however, this Caribbean-centered view of the colonial world helps to reconstitute colonial British America as a place that included tropical islands as well as mainland settlements and in which plantation enterprise was a central preoccupation.

Historians in recent years have described the development of plantation societies in the Chesapeake, Lowcountry, and Caribbean in ways that emphasize rising productivity, territorial expansion, and a tested capacity for adaptation in the face of shifting market conditions. Mulcahy’s focus on the frequency and intensity of multiple catastrophes allows him to delve into the dynamics of how individuals and societies came to terms with failure in the starkest of terms. Each devastating storm checked colonial societies in ways that are difficult to assess or calculate, but their impact was clearly profound. Early hurricanes almost prevented the English settlement of St. Christopher in the 1620s. Planters increasingly invested in large and expensive alterations to the landscape to cultivate the region’s staple commodities, sugar and rice. High winds and extensive flooding not only wiped out a year’s income, but also destroyed this landed infrastructure, sometimes sending highly leveraged planters into bankruptcy. A Barbados overseer ordered slaves to fire new clay tiles to re-roof the boiling house at Turners Hall Plantation in 1780. Without a supply of sailcloth to turn the mill, however, production slowed to a crawl. It took two full years to return to full capacity and modest profitability. The success of large-scale planting was not only limited by the vagaries of global commodities markets, frequent wars between imperial rivals, and the threat of slave resistance, but also by the damage to productivity and efficiency absorbed with every terrifying hurricane.

“For all their fury,” Mulcahy concludes, “hurricanes did not alter the fundamental structure of the plantation economy in the British Greater Caribbean” (p. 92). Yet they reinforced key trends that have defined the development of plantation America. Disasters made the
lot of smallholders less tenable, accelerating the aggrandizement of a wealthy planter elite. Members of this elite might have been more inclined to turn absentee after experiencing the horrors of a hurricane first-hand. The threat and experience of hurricanes shaped the whole series of decisions and calculations that planters and merchants undertook over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Beyond the death and destruction they caused, hurricanes impaired the planters’ quest to establish credible versions of British society in subtropical and tropical America. Not knowing whether every painstaking attempt to build plantation wealth might be destroyed at a moment’s notice made wealthy colonists worry about their futures as landowners, slaveholders, and respectable Britons. Such an interpretation echoes the image of “anxious” masters advanced by historians Joyce E. Chaplin and Kathleen M. Brown. Hurricane damage was so extreme at times that it posed something more serious than temporary cultural and economic setbacks. With their plantations in ruins, and Atlantic shipping dashed on the shore, the goal of recreating an ordered English society in the New World could seem unreachable. This “sense of fragility and uncertainty” that an annual hurricane season wove into the fabric of daily life in South Carolina, Jamaica, Barbados, and the Leewards never entirely diminished (p. 31).

Despite casting such a pall over plantation America, Mulcahy finds that post-hurricane societies, although at their most vulnerable, were neither visited by internal slave insurrections nor targeted for external enemy attack. In the long run, these disasters might actually have spurred economic productivity by allowing planters to rebuild using the latest technologies on the largest scale, in effect creating a clean-slate advantage within existing plantation economies. Although they reached for sublime language and painted heart-rending scenes of disorder, Caribbean hurricane survivors appear at times as inquisitive at the intellectual puzzle posed by hurricanes as they were panic-stricken. In the sometimes lengthy lulls between major storms, they could be close to oblivious to the natural risks they faced every hurricane season.

Strongly focused on accumulating wealth and emulating British culture, plantation elites diverted course only when forced to contend with extreme conditions. Despite the severity of these storms and the rising toll their destruction took on expanding colonial settlements, time and experience rendered hurricanes less of a psychological shock. Colonists and mariners altered their habits to conform to the height-
ened risks that began at the close of each summer and lingered into the fall. Seventeenth-century colonists tended to interpret the storms as signs of divine displeasure, but in the eighteenth century fast days and public expressions of contrition became routines that reflected the expectation that an annual storm season carried commonplace threats. European learning provided explanations of hurricanes as natural phenomena, interpretations that increasingly replaced the notion that they reflected the displeasure of an angry God. Most colonists were slow to take up useful technologies such as the barometer, but many put faith in their own empirical abilities when it came to identifying signs—from the clarity of the moon to the color of clouds—that “prognosticated” a coming hurricane.

“Living in the Greater Caribbean meant coming to terms intellectually with a distinct and violent natural world” (p. 64). No matter how routine hurricane experiences became during the colonial period, their frequency contributed to a metropolitan view of the Caribbean as a place unfit for civil, European habitation. Hurricanes lodged a “fundamental environmental uncertainty” in the very heart of Britain’s American empire (p. 4). Colonists took pains to build fine churches, impressive public buildings, and stately homes, but nature tore down these efforts in an instant, leaving this Greater Caribbean denuded of marks of architectural distinction. When they could get away with it unscathed, as they did for long periods in South Carolina at the “northern edge of the hurricane zone,” the desire to mimic British standards held sway and lofty spires and multi-story homes emerged (p. 135). In the hurricane-ravaged West Indies, however, colonists adapted their built environment to withstand the fury of these storms, favoring squat, shuttered structures and occasionally building “hurricane houses” as refuges. If “aesthetics sometimes trumped safety,” then experience with a harsh natural world also shaped regional architectural aesthetics (p. 132).

By mobilizing officials and individuals to take action, disaster relief countered the demoralizing effects of natural disasters. The outpouring of aid and sympathy were tangible demonstrations of the larger social order that unified a common British empire for its white, free subjects. After hurricanes devastated Barbados and Jamaica in 1780—taking something on the order of 20,000 white and black lives—Parliament granted an enormous bounty of £120,000 in response. An act of generosity, this infusion of cash helped secure the loyalty of the empire’s islands as it was in the process of losing much of its hold on
the North American mainland. This financial windfall “demonstrated the benefits of British subjecthood” and had the effect of focusing political disputes toward the distribution of a bounty and away from Parliamentary taxing authority.

This book’s narrow focus on hurricanes yields an elegant synthesis of cultural and environmental history, one that is illustrated throughout by colonists’ compelling first-hand accounts of life in a hurricane zone. This emphasis can be restrictive at times as well, a history of hurricane after hurricane that is sometimes tied too rigidly to the details of this particular kind of catastrophe and not attuned enough to the larger dynamic of how these societies were beset by a range of natural disasters. A chapter on humanitarian relief efforts treats responses to “fires, drought, disease, and earthquakes” as well as hurricanes (p. 143). This widening of the subject hints at the gains to be had by a more broadly gauged history. As it stands, Matthew Mulcahy’s engaging, thoroughly researched book captures a fundamental dynamic: plantation America was a place created to exploit its natural environment and was shaped, in turn, by a range of natural menaces. In doing so, it offers a distinctive and rewarding view of the colonial Caribbean.

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As left wing politics are sweeping Latin America and the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela is enjoying at least short-term socio-economic success, social movements contesting global capitalism continue to be faced with a number of pertinent questions: what is to be done after capturing the state? What are the possibilities for -and limitations implied in- breaking away from neo-colonial dependency and transforming Southern societies from mere backward peripheries to truly developed, independent and democratic countries? Is there a