

Mulcahy, Matthew. *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783*.

Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006.

In the 2006 book *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783* by Matthew Mulcahy the author uses first-hand accounts to describe in great detail the effects of hurricanes on the British Greater Caribbean for most of the 17th and 18th centuries and on the societies and cultures of the region. Mulcahy states what exactly he wants the reader to take away in his thesis, “Changing social, political, and economic conditions help shape the history of hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean” (194). The idea that hurricanes themselves affect the society and the society affects hurricanes is one of the central ideas of the book.

Windows shutter, winds howl, trees ripped out of the ground all depict the force of a hurricane. Hurricanes bring pure devastation, brought upon from God or nature greatly affecting what they strike. In Mulcahy’s works, the effects of that furious strike are greatly described with the impacts and changes brought to society reacting to a hurricane. Observing the social changes of societies struck by hurricanes is one of the themes in the book. During a particularly devastating hurricane during the period this book covers, a high ranking member of society was struck down so vigorously from his social status when his house and possession were destroyed he resorted to bearing slaves cloths and living in makeshift structures. In no other situation can that level of living standard shift happen except during catastrophic events like hurricanes in the Caribbean. The societies that grow in such a bowling alley of devastation uniquely approach hurricanes and theories regarding their conception. The hurricane gets ingrained into a society’s myths and lore. Mulcahy uses the example of both European and Native peoples and how they connect what they

do to the hurricanes. Both relate their beliefs to an angry and vengeful God or gods. The coming and going as well as the anniversary of hurricanes are treated as religious holidays by people of European descent. Actions like fasting are done in homage to past disasters along with church services. Even buildings are not immune to the effects of hurricanes. After the constant destruction of towns built in the European style, a new architecture was employed to assist the survival of those buildings after great disasters. Rounder, stouter buildings were constructed to be able to withstand hurricane-force winds and debris. The author uses direct accounts of the various disasters to get a greater idea of what it was like to go through one, which adds to the ability of the book to understand how it was like during a hurricane. How hurricanes cause a change in both people and society is what Mulcahy wants to convey the most in the book with those examples of change is the Greater Caribbean society

For the economically interested there is also a whole chapter dedicated to the view of the hurricanes from a purely economic perspective. Mulcahy goes so far as to add the exact spreadsheets with all the accounting done by individual planters in the Caribbean. Such as with the Turners Hall Plantation account, he describes that “Overall the impact of the hurricane and the cost associated with rebuilding resulted in two straight years of losses for the plantation”.

(81) One of the many plantations used to add a personal story to the people affected by hurricanes makes the book effective in its main idea that hurricanes cause massive destruction to all parts of society.

The book is divided into chapters or sections that discuss the different aspects of society that hurricanes affect and utilizes an extensive and often recurring list of sources relative to different hurricanes and even some earthquakes. The book then connects those sources with the

common theme by jumping forward and backward through periods. This jumping back and forth does make it difficult to understand in what time frame the author is trying to talk about. The book is surveying 1624-1783, a time where the Caribbean changed drastically. Jumping forward and backward makes little sense, since readers can't get an idea of when some of these disasters took place or the correct context. The examples the author uses also break his own rule of the period he chooses to survey. Multiple times throughout the book, he uses examples from beyond or before his chosen time, making the story of the period listed not enclosed. This is a positive of the book, since the reader gets the full context of where and when the events of the hurricanes that came after the chosen time to complete the picture.

Mulcahy with this book contributes to a small source of literature regarding the study of hurricanes in the great Caribbean. Thought compared to other books in the literature he covers the greatest amount of time and not just one storm. There are other books on the 1780s hurricane that devastated the region, and the author does mention that the hurricane is not the sole example in the work. For scholars, this book added to the literature about a formative time in early America.

Throughout the book "Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783" by Matthew Mulcahy, he describes well and effectively everything the effect of hurricanes on the Caribbean society. Though not totally up to date due to not mentioning Hurricane Katrina, the book still is relevant to those who live in societies that are affected by hurricanes. This book tells the stories of the British Great Caribbean analytically with numerous examples through 1628-1783 and is a fine addition to the scholarship on the topic.