Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624–1783

Sometimes you get lucky when you publish a book. Matthew Mulcahy's intriguing and well-written analysis of the cultural impact of hurricanes in the plantation regions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British America came out at an extremely apposite time for an academic publication, a month or so after one of the biggest natural disasters in American history. (1) The effects of Hurricane Katrina on American politics are going to be profound. Even now, it seems a fair bet that the presidency of George W. Bush is going to be more tarred by the abysmal government response to an event that was well within the realms of prediction (as Mulcahy shows, hurricanes are not an aberration in the experience of the American South and the West Indies but regular occurrences that any prudent government needs to construct plans to deal with) than it will be by foreign adventures, given the American public's notorious indifference to anything that happens outside the borders of continental America. Like 9/11, Hurricane Katrina was a catastrophic event played out in the full glare of the American and world media. The results were extremely unedifying, embarrassing the Bush administration and the American public more than any other event this century. What was most appalling was the extent to which Hurricane Katrina laid bare the failure of the United States to make better the lives of its poorest – and more often than not its blackest – citizens, scrabbling to make a living in a notoriously violent and racist southern city. In a few days, world attention was once again focused, in a way that had not happened since the days of Civil Rights in the 1960s, on how race worked itself out in the American south. We saw pictures of bedraggled poor black women and their children and helpless elderly hospital patients forced to exist in unimaginable squalor in the hellhole of a stadium devoted usually to the excesses of professional sport. We heard outrageous, and generally fanciful, tales of criminality and brutality that suggested that white Americans, in New Orleans at least, considered blacks in ways that were little different to their slaveholding ancestors. Those ancestors were convinced that they were masters of barbarians who were closer to animals than humans. We witnessed white officials, from the hapless

president down, being unable either to grasp the extent of the tragedy that the hurricane had wrought and also complicit in actions that suggested strongly that the lives and especially the property of affluent whites were considerably more important than the lives and property of poor people and people of colour. Bush's ideology of compassionate conservatism died a quick death in the aftermath of Katrina's destruction. As the travails of the president and his Republican party in the six months since Katrina have made clear, the incompetence of the federal, state and city authorities in New Orleans in the face of a natural disaster that had a particularly severe impact on the most disadvantaged sectors of the American population has shaken public confidence greatly. What is the point of trying to bring democracy to the developing world if the leaders of the richest and most powerful nation in the world cannot look after its own citizens?

In short, what Hurricane Katrina reaffirmed was the ability of the most fearsome natural phenomena in the Caribbean region to lay bare social assumptions and to highlight essential features of the curious civilisation created in that region, notably the extent to which white prosperity was founded on black destitution. What happened in New Orleans in late summer 2005 was a reprise in modern times of the sort of repercussions that happened after hurricanes in the early modern era. Both now and then, hurricanes are bewildering, overwhelming and mostly uncontrollable.

Anyone who has been in a hurricane feels duty bound to tell anyone who wants to listen what it was like to experience and considers the experience to be a defining event, showing (perhaps) the awesome power of God – a common response in the providentially-oriented seventeenth century – or the extent to which man could not control the natural world – a more frequent response in the eighteenth century, especially among men of science attuned to Enlightenment currents. Mulcahy gives an excellent account of how residents of the Greater Caribbean interpreted hurricanes over time and how living with hurricanes was the most tangible way in which people came to terms with living in a distinct and violent world. Then, as now, hurricanes had a differential impact on people, depending on their social circumstances, with slaves in the early modern period suffering disproportionately. As Mulcahy points out, even if hurricanes were acts of God, humans played an important role in shaping their impact. That impact could be immense in highly volatile societies, dependent on slavery, racially divided and at risk from both internal revolt and external invasion. Finally, hurricanes were so destructive of property and so indiscriminate in how they attacked that they highlighted both the necessity for preparing for disaster in the regions where hurricanes were most frequent and the obligation that natural disaster posed on people fortunate enough to escape their effects to help the unfortunate people who lost everything as a result of the destructive impact of wind and rain. One of the virtues of Mulcahy's book is that he shows how vital hurricanes were in developing humanitarian outreach in the late eighteenth century. The devastating hurricanes that swept through Barbados and Jamaica in 1780, for example, represented the highpoint of eighteenth-century relief efforts. They presaged more extraordinary efforts from the nineteenth century onward to use the power of the state and the power of humanitarian sympathy to alleviate short-term distress occasioned by events outside human control.

Of course, the continuities evident in the response to hurricanes in the past and the present should not blind us to how hurricanes are also historically specific events with historically specific consequences. For me, Mulcahy's book, which is narrowly focused on hurricanes and their immediate impact on social patterns, raised some larger points that, while not discussed in his book, seem to arise naturally out of the evidence that Mulcahy has amassed. The first of these larger issues is the extent to which hurricanes defined – physically and culturally – a particular region of early America, a region Mulcahy defines, in unproblematic fashion, as 'the British Greater Caribbean'. I doubt that everyone will share Mulcahy's belief that such a region actually existed but in my opinion the concept of a British Greater Caribbean is useful. The Hurricane region of the British mainland (roughly the coastal area of the continent south of the Mason-Dixon line and east of west Texas) and the British West Indies shared a number of common features that were more obvious when both regions were part of a single British polity than after the two regions were artificially separated as a result of the American Revolution. Of course, what united the two regions was above all a commitment to black chattel slavery. But along with that went a particular set of social attitudes, such as a devotion to the main chance, restlessness and impulsiveness, a tendency towards reckless risk-tasking, an indifference to religious feeling (that characteristic being one that vanished in both societies by the twentieth century), a

compulsive gregariousness, and a willingness to accept high degrees of individual and socially-legitimated violence. By the middle of the eighteenth century, careful observers, such as Benjamin Franklin, could distinguish the denizens of this area as being significantly different from the more cool-headed, more industrious and more fecund residents of the American North. In his "Observations on the Increase of Mankind", of 1751, Franklin argued, counterintuitively from conventional wisdom, that the future of empire in America was not the increasingly wealthy, slave-dominated societies of the South and the West Indies but was instead the American north, where, due to the absence of slaves, 'true wealth', in the form of dramatically increasing white populations, was to found. In his view, slaves were taking up spaces that could be occupied by white immigrants who in the long run would add more wealth to the empire than slave owners, because whites without slaves exhibited 'frugality and industry' while those with slaves did not.

What is interesting is the extent to which climate accentuated those features of white behaviour in the Greater Caribbean that offended Franklin. Many contemporaries, Edward Long being a noticeable example, were convinced, as followers of the humoral system in medicine, that climate was determinative of character. It is not a view we usually hold, if only because such views very quickly lapse into crude and offensive racial stereotyping. But perhaps it is time to reconsider the effect of environment in shaping colonial character. Hurricanes, for example, reinforced the temporary nature of white existence in the tropics. Building substantial dwellings and planning for the future was a bit pointless when a great wind would blow everything that you had worked for into ruin. Mulcahy notes that hurricanes made colonists question their ability to transform the environment of the Greater Caribbean into something recognisably British but does not do a great deal to explore the consequences of such a statement. It seems to me central to exploring social values and cultural mores in this region. How, for example, could one create an 'improved' society if that improvement was always so subject to violent destruction? If 'improvement' was impossible, then how could white colonists prevent themselves from succumbing to momentary passions and from living in the moment rather than preparing for the future? West Indians, the historian Charles Leslie commented in 1740, were 'careless of futurity'. They were obsessed by a future in which they would be rich and powerful but doing little to plan for it. Planning made little sense when one's efforts could be thrown away by a momentary but very powerful blast of wind and rain. The problem, however, in adopting such a carefree attitude to the future was that it suggested that colonists in the Greater Caribbean were emulating not cool, cautious Englishmen but tempestuous and present-directed Africans. Hurricanes thus reinforced tendencies towards Africanisation (at least as Africanisation was defined by contemporaries as concerned about the potential destructiveness of a slave rebellion as by a hurricane) and hindered Anglicisation.

What is harder to get at is what hurricanes meant for Africans. Whites assumed that slaves would take advantage of hurricanes to indulge in what whites thought was their habitual cruelty and instinctive criminality. Hurricanes brought out into clear relief just how terrified whites were of their slaves. Yet, as Mulcahy points out, slaves never used hurricanes to mount a serious rebellion. The most obvious reason is, as he suggests, that the principal sufferers from hurricanes were slaves, thousands perishing in the devastating storms of 1780. Yet other factors might also be at work. Africans had no more experience of hurricanes than did Europeans and had to devise ways of fitting these new and terrifying events into their cosmic universe. Unsurprisingly, they tended to treat hurricanes within a religious framework. The evidence is missing about how slaves conceptualised hurricanes but it is interesting to speculate. Were hurricanes seen as divine punishment on white pretensions? Or were they instruments of a devil that seemed more active in the New World than in the old? It is often been noted that African-derived religions in the New World were darker than in Africa, more focused on black magic and on devils. Did that have something to do with the mysterious power of hurricanes, a power even more destructive and inexplicable than the power of their white oppressors?

If the British Greater Caribbean did exist as a distinct region, the unity that linked together the British slave colonies in the hurricane danger zone disappeared during the American Revolution when the West Indian colonies left rebellion against Britain to their northern compatriots. What the effect of this artificial split was on the southern plantation colonies (especially South Carolina, the region of British North America that most resembled the British West Indies) and the British West Indies has been much debated. Usually, historians

comment on how badly affected the British West Indies were by the American Revolution, ignoring the much more drastic effects of revolutionary conflict on lowcountry South Carolina and Georgia. Yet what is seldom noted is that our analysis of the effects of the Revolution on the British West Indies is compromised by the many hurricanes that devastated the island colonies during the first half of the 1780s. It is difficult to know whether West Indian economic difficulties in this period were occasioned by the strains placed on intercolonial commerce by the outbreak of rebellion in the northern colonies and to what extent they were the result of an unprecedented number of natural disasters. Mulcahy does not look at the effect of hurricanes in this way, which is a pity, because a consideration of the hurricanes within the context of the American Revolution would do a lot to answer a question that has exercised historians' minds for a long time. For what it is worth, I think that the major causes of West Indian travails in this period were due to hurricanes. That most of the worst hurricanes occurred during the American Revolution was unfortunate historiographically. It encourages us to overstate the extent of West Indian suffering in the American Revolution and to give credence to notions that decline in the West Indian sugar economies was inevitable once half of British America declared for independence. The West Indian colonies were doing well in the late 1770s and recovered quickly from their economic downturn in the early 1780s to the extent that in the 1790s both planters and also the British government were contemplating considerable expansion of the sugar economies while the African slave trade experienced a temporary boom as the French American colonies plunged into war and revolution. Without hurricanes, it is entirely conceivable that the whole period between 1776 and 1800 would have been one of steady and at times exceptional growth in the British West Indies. Of the three issues that afflicted West Indian planters in the last quarter of the eighteenth century – the American Revolution, the beginnings of the abolitionist campaign, and hurricanes – it may have been only the natural phenomena that inflicted real damage.

Nevertheless, in the long run hurricanes were much less dangerous to the survival of the slave system in the Greater Caribbean than abolition. Over time West Indian planters came to regret not joining their southern colleagues in rebellion because independence from Britain protected South Carolinians and Georgians from the abolitionist crusade to an extent that was impossible in the West Indies. The slave system expanded enormously in the Napoleonic period in both regions as America and Britain took advantage of the breakdown of the French Atlantic system to acquire potentially lucrative sugar-growing areas in Louisiana, the Lesser Antilles and South America. Planters had every reason to feel optimistic about their future. But the optimism of West Indian planters was misplaced. Metropolitan agitation against the slave trade was so strong that it overwhelmed planters' protestations about the value of what they produced to imperial prosperity. That planters could be attacked in this way came as an enormous shock. The shock was greater than it might have been as a result of their previous experiences during the hurricane-induced crises of the 1780s when planters had reached out to Britain for assistance and when Britain had responded magnificently to their plight. As Mulcahy demonstrates, the devastation wrought by the 1780 hurricane led to an unprecedented campaign of humanitarian relief to alleviate suffering (though that suffering was strictly racially demarcated – little money went to help blacks, the principal victims). One lesson that planters did not draw from this outpouring of humanitarian sympathy was that the intellectual climate in Britain had changed. As Thomas Haskell pointed out many years ago, the growth in humanitarianism and the increasing importance of sensibility as the basis of public policy after 1750 illustrated a developing belief in the power of people to influence events even when those events happened in distant lands. The impulses that led Britons to believe that they were responsible for the plight of people suffering from natural disaster were the same impulses that led many Britons to believe it was their duty to relieve the sufferings of innocent African slaves. Perhaps in retrospect planters should have thought twice before accepting British charity.

It was understandable that planters did not pick up on what the rise of humanitarian sympathy really meant. They were grateful for what they received. It confirmed their belief that the British West Indies (and the Greater Caribbean generally) occupied a special place in imperial thinking. The abolitionist campaign against the slave trade came as a particular shock to planters because for a quarter of a century Britain had indulged them to an extent that was not replicated in the northern colonies. When colonists outside the hurricane zone in Massachusetts demonstrated their dissatisfaction with imperial policy in the 1760s and 1770s, the British government punished them with Coercive Acts, prompting rebellion. When West Indians

protested against their government, as the planters of Jamaica had done repeatedly since the 1730s, the British government caved in. They listened to planter complaints after the Seven Years' War and agreed not to take Guadeloupe from the French, taking worthless Quebec instead. They tried their best to assuage West Indian concerns about the Stamp Act and other regulatory acts in the 1760s and so prevented West Indians from joining in rebellion. They were even prepared to imperil their British North American Empire in 1781 by diverting naval forces from the Battle of Yorktown in order to save Jamaica from impending French invasion. Hurricane relief was just a further manifestation of the peculiar goodwill that the British government manifested towards the West Indies, goodwill that was in short supply in the region of America that Franklin lauded as the coming future of the British Empire. In this respect, the actual harm that hurricanes did in the West Indies shielded West Indians from a more significant danger. Hurricanes made the Greater Caribbean special. Planters thought that they lived in a privileged region and that British concern about the effects of hurricanes was a sign that their own sense of importance was recognised by the British government. That the British government and the British people were coming to see the West Indies as special in a different way – as places that were especially evil – was something that white West Indians were to learn about the hard way in years to come.

Notes

1. In the interests of full disclosure, I should note that I read and commented on some sections of this work in draft and provided Professor Mulcahy with summaries of the diaries of Thomas Thistlewood, a source that Mulcahy uses frequently in this work. I do not know Professor Mulcahy well, however and do not think that my comments on his work materially altered his argument. Back to (1)

The author would like to thank Professor Burnard for his thoughtful review and does not wish to comment further.

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