

By: Griffin Nameroff

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

Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Hurricanes are some of the worst natural disasters to hit a population or area. A hurricane can be impactful today, but during the colonial era when the technology of today was not available, the storms could be even more devastating. Matthew Mulcahy's 2006 book, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783*, is a fantastic book that goes in-depth about the destruction that hurricanes could unleash in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Mulcahy argues that hurricanes shaped almost every aspect of life for Caribbean colonists and slaves. He does this effectively with enough evidence and sources to support his argument with only minor flaws in organization. Being a professor with a PH. D in history who specializes in colonial American and disaster histories, Mulcahy has a considerable background on the topics discussed in the book and can easily be considered a credible source.

The bases for Mulcahy's argument can be seen throughout the book through the topics he discusses. He starts by giving a quick explanation of how a hurricane is formed and the dangers of one. This helps his argument to the reader in a couple of ways. The first way is the most obvious, it helps explain how a hurricane is formed for those who are not aware. The second is that it gives the reader an idea of what kind of storms hurricanes are. Giving the reader an image of a colonial settlement being blasted with a hundred mile an hour winds and being drenched with rain, helps show the severity of these storms.

Besides the explanation and description of a hurricane, Mulcahy further improves his argument with other topics he discusses. One of the best topics he talks about is the damage the hurricanes could bring to the colonists. Mulcahy discusses how hurricanes would destroy the buildings of sugar and rice plantations along with the crops themselves. When it came to buildings, hurricanes could potentially hit more than once a year or hit a colony in consecutive years. This means that a colonist could lose their house to a hurricane one year, then rebuild it and lose it again in the same or following year. Hurricanes were also just as damaging when it came to crops such as sugar or rice. Mulcahy explains that sugar canes were particularly vulnerable, “Hurricanes struck a few months before the start of the harvest, greatly damaging the mature canes.” (71) While hurricanes hurt sugar and rice sales, they also destroy crops that are used for food. According to Mulcahy, the loss of these crops often led to famines—particularly among slaves—and led to more death. Famines sometimes killed more people than the storm itself

Another aspect of colony life that Mulcahy explains is the use of charity and how it became essentially a foundation of colony life in the Caribbean. Charity played a big role in keeping colonies surviving by giving food or money for repairs. While rich plantation owners could recoup their losses through loans or out of their pocket, poorer colonists were not as lucky. Mulcahy explains that as a result of this, hurricane relief from charities and the British Government became a constant necessity to support the colonists. Hurricane relief became even more important when the American Revolution began because it cut off trade between America and the Caribbean colonies. However, while the revolution cut off America temporarily as a trading partner, it did result in Britain giving larger amounts of money to the Caribbean colonies to prevent a rebellion there as well.

Besides the topics he covers, Mulcahy also strengthens his argument by using effective primary and secondary sources. He uses primary sources such as farmers and plantation owner's accounts from the storms. A good example of this is when Mulcahy quotes and uses accounts from Thomas Thistlewood, a farmer who lived in the Caribbean colonies and survived several of the harsh hurricanes that came with them. He also uses newspapers from the time such as the Kingston Gazette. Mulcahy mostly uses secondary sources for more of the scientific or detail information. An example of this is his use of Ann-marie Adams and Sally McMurry's book, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*. Their work was used to help explain the type of houses colonists would build and they often got destroyed.

The only flaw in Mulcahy's book is in the organization. The book is organized by topic rather than a chronological approach. Mulcahy focuses on the different topics he discusses; this means that he tends to skip from year to year to fit the topic at hand. The skipping does not affect his overall argument, but it can make following the order of events tricky.

*Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783* is an excellent history of hurricanes of the seventieth and eightieth centuries. Mulcahy explains his argument—that hurricanes affected every aspect of colonist's lives—in a well thought out and detailed book. His work is enjoyable and mostly easy to read. While the time skips can be confusing at times, they rarely take away from the overall book. This means that almost anyone can pick up Mulcahy's book and can not only follow it easily but can also enjoy it as well.

I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work: Griffin Nameroff