

Review - Sea of Storms

Written by Joseph Christensen

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JOSEPH CHRISTENSEN, MAY 28 2017

***Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina*
by Stuart B. Schwartz,
Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015**

Last year's Hurricane Matthew serves as a reminder that so-called 'natural disasters' are truly transnational phenomenon. The second major hurricane of the 2016 Atlantic Hurricane season, and the first Category 5 hurricane in a decade, Matthew took shape near the Windward Islands before moving across the Caribbean Sea, past Haiti and Cuba and through the Bahamas to the south-eastern United States, before finally dissipating off North Carolina nearly two weeks after it began. More than 600 deaths were recorded in six countries, with Haiti bearing the brunt; mild, perhaps, by historical comparison, but certainly a hurricane that demonstrates how the extremes of tropical weather hold no regard for political boundaries or national borders. With long-term forecasts predicting more frequent intense hurricanes, the diverse societies and cultures inhabiting the islands and coasts of the Caribbean Sea can expect to be sharing the common experience of deadly winds, rains and storm surges many times again in the years to come.

It is not surprising, then, to find the environment now figures prominently in works of transnational history. All the same, few works have attained the temporal and geographical scope that is the hallmark of Stuart Schwartz's *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina*, a study of North Atlantic hurricanes spanning nearly five centuries, from the mid-sixteenth century to the present.

At the outset of this magisterial study, the author acknowledges his debt to Ferdinand Braudel's influential *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*, first published in 1949. This highly-influential work set out to reconceptualise the Mediterranean past by examining the role of geography and environment (or 'climate', in Braudel's terminology) in shaping a common historical experience amongst otherwise-diverse ethnic and religious groups, setting an example that has been followed by historians of other ocean basins, most notably the Indian Ocean, where Braudel is an esteemed figure to this day. The Caribbean, Schwartz observes, is well-suited to this model of 'a history that overcomes linguistic, political, and cultural boundaries' [ix]. The strength of his work is that it successfully overcomes Braudel's tendency to view the environment deterministically, relegating the short-term history of events to the margins of a *longue duree* shaped by human-environment interaction within set physical parameters. Instead, Schwartz's focus is squarely on social and political responses to disaster events over time, an approach that highlights human agency in the face of disaster, and which allows, as the narrative's comparative perspective unfolds, for hurricanes to be understood as processes, rather than simply events.

Any disaster is, almost by definition, a large-scale and complex event, effecting masses of people and defying simple or straightforward remedies. Historical disasters have added complexity, because first-hand accounts of them are often limited by virtue of the destructive nature of the event itself, and whereas religious interpretations abound, scientific (in this case, meteorological) observation is, as a general rule, quite patchy prior to the mid-twentieth century, and mostly non-existent any earlier than the mid-nineteenth century. The need for an interdisciplinary approach is paramount. Although other environmental histories of the Caribbean have pointed the way - J.R. McNeil's *Mosquito Empires* (2012) is a shining example - Schwartz is breaking new ground here, drawing on extensive archival research, early scientific treatises, and modern meteorological and climatological studies. Rarely

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has a single environmental phenomenon been examined across such scale, in space and time. As yet, nothing comparable has appeared in print for extreme tropical storms elsewhere in the world; cyclones in the Indian Ocean, for example, or typhoons in the Northwest Pacific and South China Seas.

There are nine chapters to this book, each touching upon the major themes of Caribbean history. These cover indigenous perspectives and understandings, the European encounter with the region's fierce storms, the development of meteorological knowledge and of colonial approaches to the relief of famine and disease, the influence of storms on the institution of slavery, and in the twentieth century, the politics of disaster mitigation and relief, when the role of the United States in the region becomes paramount.

By necessity, Schwartz's 'Greater Caribbean' concentrates on hurricane-prone areas, so that the book has little to say about Trinidad and Tobago, Curacao, Venezuela, Columbia or Bermuda, however integral these countries may be to the region's history. The focus on storms after they cross the coast, when most damage occurs, also means that much less is said about the influence of extreme weather over maritime trade, shipping routes and piracy, nor about shipwrecks, one of the more frequent outcomes of hurricanes in the Caribbean. These deficiencies are more than balanced, however, by the author's willingness to look beyond Spanish, French and English colonies to the lesser-known possessions of The Netherlands and Denmark, and by his commitment to locating each storm within the relevant social and political context, helping to demonstrate how varied the impacts of a hurricane can be, depending on the nature of the community affected by it. One of the chief lessons of this book is that the weak, poor and powerless have been all too often been the main victims of hurricanes and the social upheavals that severe storms create.

If the aim of environmental history is to demonstrate the utility of historical knowledge, than *Sea of Storms* succeeds in showing that understanding the past is indeed a vital tool for planning a better future. Schwartz's final chapter, devoted to Hurricanes Katrina (2005) and Sandy (2012), sounds a note of warning for the region; both events produced responses eerily reminiscent of earlier disasters, in terms of both a tendency for divine retribution to be invoked as an underling cause, and the inevitability of the socially marginal bearing the brunt of the destruction each hurricane unleashed. This book, then, ends with a caution – the lessons of the past are not being learnt. With the likelihood of more Category 5 hurricanes increasing with global climate change, and the Caribbean already recognised as one of the most disaster-prone regions on earth, the need for such authoritative studies of the past, spanning multiple countries and many centuries, has never been greater.

About the author:

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