Stuart B. Schwartz

Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. xxvii + 439 pp. (Cloth US\$35.00)

Before Columbus, each year around June, Island Caribs in Martinique scanned the horizon for the appearance of the constellation they called The Heron's Canoe, signaling the onset of the hurricane season and the need for heightened vigilance. Today on the island, French meteorologists scan the screens at their state-of-the-art radar installation and broadcast the exact degree of vigilance (*jaune, orange, or rouge*) on radio, TV, and the Internet. *Sea of Storms* covers the intervening 500 years throughout the greater Caribbean, focusing on the interactions between the storms and political events, religious beliefs, the organization of welfare and relief efforts, and much more. The blurbs claim the book is "exemplary," "magnificent," "breathtaking," "remarkable," "engaging," "illuminating," "timely," "essential," and "magisterial." And while there may be a touch of hyperbole here, *Sea of Storms* is, in fact, imaginative, original, erudite, and—like everything Schwartz writes—a very good read.

The book has been brewing for twenty-five years. Like the hurricanes it describes, it engorges vast quantities of material but, unlike the storms, spits it back out in an orderly manner. Often-obscure Spanish, French, English, Dutch, and Danish sources comele as the distinguished author gives readers a run through post-Columbian Caribbean history as seen from the perspective of hurricanes. Explicitly inspired by Braudel's *Mediterranean*, Schwartz sought a "meta-narrative, a general organizing theme that would allow me to examine the past of the region over the long course of its history" (p. xi). Such themes as "slavery, war, plantations, migration, and colonialism" have all provided convenient metanarratives, he writes, but here he explores a new one that "in a variety of ways has influenced all these other themes as well" (p. xi). The book is not about "the hurricanes themselves, but how people, governments, and societies have responded to them" (p. xvii).

A couple of themes stand out. First, the influence of slavery and its legacy of racial prejudice on the way societies have responded to hurricanes. Here, Schwartz demonstrates that there has been a remarkable continuity in the arguments for and against governmental aid to the victims of hurricanes, stretching across the centuries and including all of the political-linguistic regions of the Greater Caribbean. And second, the fact that since the dawn of the twentieth century, when U.S. influence became dominant in the region, response to hurricanes has been dominated by that nation's hegemonic position.

Certain storms provide Schwartz with opportunities for a tour de force. The devastating San Felipe hurricane of 1928, for example, which hit Guadeloupe and St. Kitts, then Puerto Rico, then Nassau, then Florida, allows him to reveal how differences of politics, culture, and policy played out at a particular moment. (It also leaves us the most striking illustration in the book: the trunk of a mature coconut palm pierced by a wooden two-by-four, driven half-way through by the wind, forming a cross.) The chapters on the twentieth century are among the book's strongest, revealing much about Castro's Cuba, Trujillo's Dominican Republic, the Duvaliers' Haiti, and George W. Bush's (and Barack Obama's) United States, all through the eyes of the great storms.

Schwartz quotes the occasional Puerto Rican *plena*, Trinidadian calypso, or Jamaican proverb but could have enriched the book by citing some of the rich literature on hurricanes—Kamau Brathwaite's moving *Shar: Hurricane Poem* (1990) on the experience of Gilbert (1988) and its wrenching personal aftermath, comes to mind. It's not surprising, in a work of this breadth, with fifty pages of often-fascinating footnotes, to find an occasional error. Guadeloupe and Martinique became *départements d'outre-mer* in 1946, not 1948, and the Heron's Canoe refers to Ursa Major, not Ursa Minor, according to Douglas Taylor ("Notes on the Star Lore of the Caribbees"), who based his conclusions on fieldwork with Carib-speakers in the Dominica Carib Territory as well as on Breton and de la Borde.

Schwartz estimates that there have been between 4,000 and 5,000 Caribbean hurricanes since Columbus, and he treats a remarkable number of them through the centuries. Yet many memorable ones are, of necessity, omitted. The "total devastation" of Grenada in 2004 by Ivan, the tenth most intense of all modern Atlantic hurricanes, doesn't get a mention, nor does Dean (2007), the eighth most intense, which ripped apart our sturdy architect-built garage and then deposited the pieces several hundred yards westward, almost dumping them in the sea. The fact that homeowner's insurance paid half of our rebuilding costs but that most of our neighbors, who suffered far greater damage, had none, is the sort of thing Schwartz's book, on a much grander scale, helps us understand.

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