Matthew Mulcahy

Hubs of Empire: The Southeastern Lowcountry and British Caribbean. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. viii + 244 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

In his contribution to Johns Hopkins University Press's Regional Perspectives on Early America series, Matthew Mulcahy offers a skillful and timely synthesis of the latest scholarly literature on the colonial Lowcountry and British West Indies. The geographic scope of this book is purposefully wide, encompassing an area that extended from the British sugar islands of the Caribbean to the South Carolina and Georgia Lowcountry, "a coastal zone stretching from the Cape Fear River to the Altamaha River in Georgia and inland roughly fifty miles" (p. 2). With chapters that explore the founding, development, and expansion of colonial societies within this broader region—particularly Barbados, Jamaica, and South Carolina—he provides a concise narrative that reflects his firm grasp of the histories of these "hubs of empire."

Throughout, Mulcahy overlays his synthesis with a broader methodological argument, insisting that scholars should hitch the Lowcountry and the British West Indies together in a "British Greater Caribbean" region, an area characterized by unique environmental "challenges," a "shared history," plantation economies, and most importantly, the "powerful influence of African cultures and peoples" (pp. 2, 213). Indeed, his portrait of Greater Caribbean slave life provides perhaps the strongest support for considering the Lowcountry and the British West Indies to be a single region, and his treatment of slavery is particularly deft given the volume of recent scholarly output on this topic. As he rightly notes, Greater Caribbean colonies stood apart from other mainland slave societies in that their black majority populations were comprised primarily of enslaved Africans rather than creole African Americans. This was a demographic distinction that made a real difference, allowing slaves to maintain African practices and traditions much longer than slaves in plantation colonies like Virginia. The predominance of African slaves did not merely affect slave life, however; it also had a lasting impact on broader Greater Caribbean culture. Attending to the lives of enslaved people reveals that the colonies of the Greater Caribbean, more than any others, shared a developmental trajectory that was profoundly shaped by the actions, desires, and cultures of enslaved Africans.

Mulcahy argues that deploying a Greater Caribbean regional framework is more than merely fashionable. In fact, it can help scholars and students alike to avoid teleology and exceptionalism by reminding us that "there were more than thirteen colonies in eighteenth-century British America" and that colonial American history therefore should not take as its endpoint the American

Revolution (p. 8). The British Empire in America encompassed not only mainland colonies, but also the West Indian sugar islands, which in economic and geopolitical terms were vastly more significant. Perhaps more importantly, this broader framework also renders South Carolina “less an exceptional place on the mainland and more like the plantation colonies in British America as a whole” (p. 8). When it is compared to the West Indian colonies rather than to Virginia or Massachusetts, South Carolina appears as an outpost of a larger Barbados “plantation complex” rather than an outlier.

Coupling the Lowcountry with the British West Indies is not new, as Mulcahy acknowledges. Indeed, such a practice has become *de rigueur* in recent years. Mulcahy shines, however, in resisting the temptation to overstate similarities between the Lowcountry and the British Caribbean, or to reify “regions” as categories of analysis. Instead, he acknowledges that the Greater Caribbean region, and even regions themselves, are artificial, albeit useful constructs, and he highlights differences between the sugar islands and colonial South Carolina in particular. For example, South Carolina’s subtropical (rather than tropical) climate influenced agricultural development, and slave labor in the Lowcountry was organized in task rather than gang labor systems, which “in turn influenced slave life and culture more broadly” (p. 7). Crucially, for all of their similarities, South Carolina and West Indian colonists also diverged in their response to the imperial crises of the 1760s and 1770s.

Adding the Lowcountry to a Greater Caribbean regional framework begs the question of why South Carolina colonists ultimately sided with their mainland counterparts in 1776 while those in the West Indies remained within the British Empire. Drawing on recent scholarship, Mulcahy points to a complex set of factors, including greater economic dependence on Great Britain and the specter of slave revolts, which rendered the island colonists “far more vulnerable and far more dependent” on the metropole than Lowcountry colonists (p. 209). Nonetheless, answering this question remains a significant challenge for scholars who might seek to deploy a Greater Caribbean framework in their future projects.

Lee B. Wilson

Department of History and Geography, Clemson University,
Clemson SC 29634, U.S.A.
wilsonl@clemson.edu