
We know from writers and poets of the Caribbean that elements of the region’s physical environment are vital ingredients of a cultural whole and not simply parts of a passive material backdrop. Historians certainly have not ignored the region’s environments, yet it is only recently that they have given it special explanatory attention. Perhaps most notably, the work of historians Louis A. Pérez and Stuart Schwartz on Caribbean hurricanes and of John McNeill, with his emphasis on the region’s disease environments, are beginning to lead the way toward a fuller understanding of the region’s past using physical environmental emphases.

In Climate & Catastrophe historian Sherry Johnson emphasizes the role of climatic factors in helping to understand sociopolitical changes in colonial Cuba at the end of the eighteenth century. In a nutshell, her argument is that a series of devastating late eighteenth-century hurricanes caused such grief-producing damage to local shipping, trade, and subsistence cultivation that Cuban officials had to relax existing trading statutes, allowing, most notably, direct trade between Cuba and the newly-independent United States, rather than operating under archaic and restrictive Spanish shipping regulations. As part of a useful summary statement at the end of her study, Johnson writes “The undeniable existence of a climate shift, the political, economic, and social consequences of disaster, and a wider understanding of Cuba’s place in the Atlantic World are the issues that most inform this research. This book has established the environmental reasons for why so many governors could exercise their autonomy when faced with a catastrophic situation” (p. 201).

Johnson’s book has seven chapters, illustrated with a total of four pictures and three Caribbean-wide maps locating “hurricane strikes” in selected years. There are appendices, endnotes, and a bibliography. The chapter titles are derived from local officials’ comments at the time and provide a pleasing, stylish format as opposed to a wooden list of topics, time periods, or events. Johnson thanks for research help many officials and librarians from a remarkable number of libraries in the United States, Spain, and Cuba, and one in Germany. In the book’s front material she acknowledges permission
to use information and material from several of her previously published articles.

At the beginning of her book, Johnson relates her study to the scientific literature pertaining to the recurring (and imperfectly understood) El Niño and La Niña meteorological events that have influenced and disrupted global weather, including that in the Caribbean, apparently for millennia. An El Niño event, when periodic surges of warm Pacific air and water cause torrential rainstorms off coastal Peru, is associated with drought in the Caribbean, whereas the La Niña, when the Atlantic is colder than usual, is thought to increase hurricane activity in the region. Since reliable weather records date back only to the mid-nineteenth century, scientists from several disciplines have pushed probable El Niño and La Niña dates further back by developing ingenious surrogate measures, deriving these early dates from geological data, pollen analyses, and faunal remains. Johnson refers to her own qualitative archival research combined with others’ tables developed from these “proxy” weather indicators to neatly clinch her point that the Caribbean region of the late 1700s was a period of abnormally severe drought and hurricanes, the latter most notably in 1766, 1772, 1780, and 1794.

Probably those most appreciative of Johnson’s book will be historians of colonial Cuba. Her impressive archival research provides a clear picture of tensions between Spain and Cuba, personal and political rivalries, fine points dealing with the cumbersome and outdated Spanish shipping regulations versus more practical trade possibilities with neighboring areas, changing Cuban relations with Spanish Louisiana and Spanish Florida, and the disruptions hurricanes caused in Cuban subsistence production. At times, while reading a lengthy discussion about these or other issues, it is difficult to keep Johnson’s main thesis in mind because her narrative seems not to be driving her argument forward.

It is not easy to accept fully that “environmental reasons” were the main cause behind the greater autonomy of local governors in Cuba at the end of the eighteenth century. To be sure, the effects of hurricanes and local storms were disastrous but weren’t they simply several among a constellation of local and international events contributing to overall sociopolitical change? One is reminded of other times and other places in the Caribbean where, for example, a decade of low crop prices combined with low wages has led to labor disturbances in a declining local sugar cane industry,