

Walter J. Fraser, Jr.. *Lowcountry Hurricanes: Three Centuries of Storms at Sea and Ashore*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006. xiii + 319 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-2866-9.



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Published on H-Environment (August, 2007)

Southern Breezes: Hurricanes and Regional Identity.

In the wake of hurricane activity during the first decade of the twenty-first century, historians have begun to make sense of the natural disaster's relationship with the human and natural environments. Among recent works, two authors have focused on hurricanes and the Caribbean. Louis A. Perez's *Winds of Change* (2000) and Matthew Mulcahy's *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean* (2005) have caught environmental historians' attention by documenting how the natural phenomenon impacted the region's politics, society, culture, and economy. Just as historians have explained how climate affected this region's development and identity, Perez and Mulcahy individually argue that destructive storms also deserve closer analysis in defining people and place.

In *Lowcountry Hurricanes: Three Centuries of Storms at Sea and Ashore*, Walter J. Fraser Jr. follows Perez and Mulcahy's observations to explain how destructive squalls shaped the South Carolina and Georgia coast. By documenting low-

country residents' reactions to hurricanes and cyclones, the Southern historian summarizes how these storms "profoundly affected the human, built, and natural environments" (p. 251). He stresses that hurricanes' violent and destructive forces presented weather related problems to each generation of coastal residents by dramatically altering the physical environment, weakening or destroying the rural and urban infrastructure, and threatening human life. Although not an environmental historian by training, Fraser creates a straightforward narrative by synthesizing natural disasters with traditional social, political, and economic issues.

Lowcountry Hurricanes consists of nine chronological chapters documenting storms' alteration on South Carolina and Georgia from 1686 to 2004. The first chapter presents a century-long overview of hurricanes during the colonial period and early republic. At the beginning of the narrative, Fraser provides some brief scientific background on hurricane formation and the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Potential Damage Scale. Environmental historians will find this information of

interest as it provides a basic foundation for associating the natural world with human action, yet Fraser's narrative adds this information as forethought instead of a comprisal. The introductory chapter also describes how European and African inhabitants reacted as eighteenth-century storms disrupted the burgeoning English colony. The power of hurricanes was amplified along the South Carolina and Georgia coast because of its shallow, gradually sloping sea floor and low-lying coastline. As a result, destructive storm surges played havoc with coastal towns, developing plantations, and the shipping industry.

The first chapter also introduces two recurring themes throughout the book. The first addresses how hurricanes hindered the lowcountry's urban, rural, and seafaring economy. For example, powerful winds and flooding either damaged or destroyed exposed coastal towns, such as Charleston and Savannah, while reeking havoc on refuge-seeking ships. Ocean storm surges also pushed saltwater up tidal rivers, breaching embankments separating rice fields from water sources, and thus contaminated the crop. Ironically, the two most consistent months for lowcountry hurricanes coincided with the rice crop's final stages of cultivation. Fraser's invocation of hurricanes' cataclysmic effects raises questions of why victims did not move. In *Lowcountry Hurricanes* the author explains that people experiencing financial success continued to live in the region, risking life and capital during the hurricane season, while less fortunate Euro-Americans often moved to safer environments.

The second theme of *Lowcountry Hurricanes* is the relationship between the region's racial issues and natural disasters. Although economics partially determined which Euro-Americans chose to live in the lowcountry even after devastating storms, slave institutions mandated that African Americans stay during the hurricane season. As a result, enslaved people experienced higher mortality rates, as "the loss of life among

the lowcountry slave population perhaps accounted for as many as 90 percent of all deaths at sea and shore" (p. 53). Fraser describes how enslaved African Americans were constantly subjected to flooding and winds while living on exposed sea islands, flood-prone tidal rivers, or inland wetlands. After storms, planters increased the already strenuous workload by forcing enslaved laborers to restore the damaged plantation landscape. Even after abolition, slave descendents remained more susceptible to natural disasters as racial economic factors prevented African Americans from obtaining economic and social mobility away from these low-lying areas.

The six central chapters devoted to hurricanes in the nineteenth century further promote Fraser's themes. In the nineteenth century, race and class still determined who stayed and who left. Also, international newspapers and travel literature sensationalizing the natural disasters possibly discouraged potential inhabitants, for Fraser argues, "the horrific details of [hurricanes] likely gave pause to any white immigrants who were considering relocating to the lowcountry" (p. 54). As a result, the settlement patterns contributed to the lowcountry's distinctiveness by creating an economic void, lack of cultural diversity, and social stagnation.

The book's central chapters also illustrate the relationship between rice cultivation and hurricanes by noting how weather defined agriculture, class formation, economic development, and population migration. During the antebellum period, rice propelled the lowcountry's market economy. The growing slave population increased in relation to the cash crop's success, while planters and slaves developed more wetlands to produce higher crop yields. As a result, economic development placed more people in harm's way of hurricanes, multiplying the destruction. Hurricanes disrupted the South Carolina and Georgia rice industry by displacing people, and destroying labor-intensive levees and fields. The amount of damage deter-

mined if planters would continue to cultivate rice during the next season or relocate to safer land to start a new life.

The final two chapters summarize hurricanes' role in the twentieth-century lowcountry. As Fraser explains, "the four hurricanes of the 1890s, an unprecedented number for a single decade, shattered the fragile lowcountry economy based on rice, phosphates, timber, lumber, and the export business--major employers of the region" (p. 202). The faltering lowcountry rice industry eventually collapsed from devastating hurricanes in 1910 and 1911. African Americans' loss of jobs, combined with a depressed economy, led to displacement of farmers and field hands. On the other hand, business leaders sought to attract alternative revenue sources, leading to the rise of tourism, military development, and the shipping industry.

Increasing tourism and residential development along the South Carolina and Georgia coastline presented a new set of questions in relation to hurricanes. The growing coastal population and resort development impacted the fragile sea islands, which served as a natural buffer zone against storm surges, by eroding protective sand dunes. Development along the coastal zone led to increasing insurance costs, property liability, and anxiety. Despite these problems, developers and boosters saw their right to alter the environment as they saw fit and calculating its cost-benefit analysis above the risk of property destroyed by potential hurricanes.

Lowcountry Hurricanes is a useful history explaining why weather has played a critical role in defining a region. However, Fraser's focus on the catastrophic events loses sight of how residents rebuilt after each wave of destruction. What efforts did these people make to combat the next hurricane season, if any? There is no mention of people's structural adaptation to survive storm surges before 1911, yet the Battery in Charleston and elevated colonial and antebellum building

foundations represent architectural contributions located along the Georgia and South Carolina coast that still endure today. Did these constructions represent a gradual understanding of hurricanes that determined where people could and could not live up to the late twentieth century? Although Fraser's use of primary sources focuses on newspapers, letters, and journals, I am curious if more research in state statutes--through lawmakers' acts and citizens' petitions--could have revealed more information on colonial and antebellum society. Also, I am surprised that Fraser did not dig deeper in plantation journals (he cites only edited volumes) to provide descriptive material concerning how hurricanes affected plantation crops. His observation of people's migration after hurricanes is an important theme that leaves me asking more questions on the subject. Specifically, how many people left after each hurricane? How did their exodus specifically shape the compounding generations of people who remained?

Fraser, however, shines in his detailed descriptions of key hurricanes. Events, like the 1822 hurricane, read as intriguing narratives to describe the devastation that such powerful natural disasters could produce. For those readers who have never experienced a hurricane first hand, Fraser's descriptions closely approximate the anxiety, chaos, and fear of having to ride out such a storm. He also poses tough questions of modern society's relationship with hurricanes. What is the role of the state and business in protecting the ever-expanding coastal population? Should people risk the erratic hurricane patterns and build on sea islands or should they respect the destructive nature of hurricanes and use these valuable landscapes as much needed buffer zones? In this regard, this book contributes to our understanding of development ethics in the twenty-first century and a broader interpretation of natural disasters' impact on society.

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Citation: Hayden Smith. Review of Fraser, Walter J., Jr. *Lowcountry Hurricanes: Three Centuries of Storms at Sea and Ashore*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

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