

who were forced to mine emeralds; indeed, they continue to do so today, when impoverished miners dig emeralds to feed the fashion for Mughal-style jewellery among the new Indian bourgeoisie.

This is not a conventional book of Latin American history; it is, as the author says, more an 'experiment in global history by way of a luxury commodity' (p. 2). But that is its strength, for the author makes a strong case for 'reorienting' Latin American colonial history. Through the prism of the Colombian emerald, he tells us much about the dynamics of global commodity trades, the relation of European mercantile expansion to Asian societies, the imbrication of Luso-Hispanic mercantile networks, the interactions of Jewish traders and Muslim courtly cultures and, above all, the significance of Asia in driving early modern European commercial capitalism.

Well written, well illustrated, imaginative in its approach and deploying an impressive and eclectic range of sources, this book traces the history of an exotic Spanish American commodity to great effect. By paying as much attention to demand as to supply, the author shows how this very special commodity created new global commercial connections between communities and cultures of very different kinds, and thereby throws new light on the origins and consequences of Spanish colonisation in America, Portuguese expansion in the East, and the first globalisation that came in their wake.

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Sherry Johnson, *Climate and Catastrophe in Cuba and the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), pp. xiii + 305, \$39.95, hb.

This book chronicles how bad weather, particularly dozens of hurricanes, marked Cuba in the long eighteenth century. It links the growing interest in environmental and climate history with the never-ending effort to rethink the political disturbances on both sides of the Atlantic in the late eighteenth century. *Climate Catastrophe* aims to show that hurricanes, floods and droughts not only moulded the Caribbean but also helped prompt and shape the Atlantic Revolutions. The author convincingly demonstrates the former idea; I remain sceptical about the latter.

Severe weather in the Caribbean in this period was more a norm than an exception as El Niño/La Niña struck almost annually. The appendix listing hurricanes, storms and droughts in the Caribbean from 1749 to 1800 runs for four pages. Core chapters focus on how these phenomena affected key moments in Cuba: the 1762 British victory in Havana, the brutal year of 1772 when multiple hurricanes struck the Caribbean, the transition from King Charles III to Charles IV in the late 1780s and early 1790s, and warfare with France in the 1790s. Each of these chapters reads well and tells an interesting and important story concerning the political and economic impact of floods, droughts and hurricanes.

By devastating food production and distribution, these catastrophes prompted merchants and consumers to circumvent the restrictions the crown maintained on goods produced outside of the Spanish realm and the onerous rules controlling trade within it. When Cuba could not produce enough food, as was frequently the case, it had to turn to Mexico (often confronting its own shortages) or English or French colonies (especially the Thirteen Colonies, Jamaica and Saint-Domingue) through

legal or illegal channels. While Cuban authorities and in several cases those of Madrid punished those who broke the law, they also reacted to these crises by adjusting trade policy. They sought to make sure that Cubans and others had enough to eat, understanding hunger and rampant illegal trade as inimical to imperial control. The sections on catastrophe, smuggling and the debates about 'free trade' form the strongest part of the book – the author shows how bad weather, fragile environments, imperial rivalries and mercantilist notions made a volatile mix. The hurricanes were not the only rapidly moving object: political alliances as well as agrarian trade policies changed frequently throughout the eighteenth century.

Johnson tells the story well, moving with ease between Havana, Philadelphia and Madrid and demonstrating that the venerable debates about *comercio libre* and Spanish imperialism can benefit from the consideration of environmental issues and fluctuating food policies. She stresses the catastrophe's impact on life in Cuba and, above all, on imperial policies. Some readers might have wanted more on how different groups understood hurricanes and how these events shook up transatlantic debates about climate and society in the Americas. With her deep research in archives and libraries in several countries, however, the author provides the material for such follow-up studies. The chapters on specific hurricanes and their impact are rich; the analysis of 1762, for example, shows how food shortages and the ensuing illnesses and mass disgruntlement weakened Spanish defences and facilitated the British attack on Havana. The Spanish troops suffered from fevers and hunger at this crowning moment of the Seven Years War. Textbooks always cast the English invasion of Havana as a humiliation for the Spanish; Johnson's lively description of emaciated soldiers and panicked authorities, debating whether to evacuate Havana in part because of food shortages, deepens our understanding of this turning point. This and other chapters underline the advantages for historians of the Atlantic world and the Caribbean of taking climate seriously.

The introduction and conclusion are the weakest sections of the book. Johnson's argument about the centrality of hurricanes to the Atlantic Revolutions far too often approaches hyperbole. The author feels compelled to underline how her study helps rethink events in the Caribbean, North America and Europe. In my mind, and this is a matter of style and thus a personal decision, her work demonstrates the close relationship and even dependency between climate, food and warfare. In light of this major contribution, the author did not need to cast her work as a rethinking of the long eighteenth century, or its revolutions. Too much of the first and last chapters reads like back-cover material or a grant application. In the same regard, Johnson's listing of theoretical influences weakens an otherwise smart conclusion. No reader will be surprised or impressed to learn that she built on 'interdisciplinary theories' or 'principles of transnationality' (pp. 199, 200). Although she uses the phrase 'of course' when pointing out that hurricanes are by definition transnational, the point seems unnecessary. Few historians today would sustain that they don't venture over disciplinary and national borders; none working on such a quirky, devastating and by definition global occurrence such as hurricanes would do so. Nonetheless, Johnson builds from the literature on 'natural disasters' and contributes greatly to our understanding of Cuba and the often surprising and always significant impact of hurricanes and storms in the eighteenth century and beyond.

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