

1980

## Hurricane David: the skeleton of a survival tale

Phyllis Shand Allfrey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Allfrey, Phyllis Shand, Hurricane David: the skeleton of a survival tale, *Kunapipi*, 2(1), 1980.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol2/iss1/16>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Hurricane David: the skeleton of a survival tale

### Abstract

On Wednesday 29 August 1979 the mountainous island of Dominica (29 miles X 16 miles) was devastated by hurricane David. We, personally, had been seriously warned. My sister telephoned from St Vincent the day before to urge us to leave our little stone house in the valley, surrounded by water, and 'go up higher'. Like us, she feared the probability of our drowning more than injury from the tremendous winds - though she no doubt had better advice than we did on the strength and course of the hurricane. Meteorological radio reports had prepared us for a strike further south - Barbados. Later we learned that the original force of this hurricane was about 300 mph, not the 180 mph stated officially, but that US aviation scientists had 'seeded' it to bring down the speed ... well.

## Hurricane David: the skeleton of a survival tale

On Wednesday 29 August 1979 the mountainous island of Dominica (29 miles  $\times$  16 miles) was devastated by hurricane David.

We, personally, had been seriously warned. My sister telephoned from St Vincent the day before to urge us to leave our little stone house in the valley, surrounded by water, and 'go up higher'. Like us, she feared the probability of our drowning more than injury from the tremendous winds — though she no doubt had better advice than we did on the strength and course of the hurricane. Meteorological radio reports had prepared us for a strike further south — Barbados. Later we learned that the original force of this hurricane was about 300 mph, not the 180 mph stated officially, but that US aviation scientists had 'seeded' it to bring down the speed ... well. Indeed had we gone up higher, we might have suffered a crueller fate. The new house we had in mind lost its roof (like ours) and was damaged badly. By staying in our little house (built 1830, tremendously thick stone walls) we definitely saved it and ourselves.

The onslaught started with a lot of rain in the morning; then the winds struck: no thunder. It was an attack by an evil giant on the sleeping beauty; worse than the bombardment of England because it was so inescapable and lasted so long (over six hours); the shattering noise of gnarled fingers deliberately tearing out the roofing burst overhead.

After a while we had no cover up above save the thin ceiling-board, which began to split. Floods came into the house slantwise; our bed was soaking. Later we took refuge in Robbie's tiny room, which provided a patch of roof. The boy had gone to the Carib Reserve for his 'last week of holiday'. We were alone save for our pets: two dogs, a father and a mother cat, and their two kittens; out in the field two goats were tethered, potential victims of flying sharp galvanize. The poor animals were confused, and seemed with their eyes to blame us for the dreadful change in their lives.

We were alone together, and since we had wanted to die together, we were not afraid. However we struggled to save the animals and the house, pressing a mattress against the bay window with our soaking bodies to fight the increasing fierceness. A major part of the roof had been cast into the millpond by the winds, together with our only spade and various household implements which we only discovered days afterwards. The horizontal rain continued to batter us with a deepthroated roar; we were surrounded by swirling waters and mud which came into the carport (also our working and eating shelter): this breached itself under our front door!

Then on the afternoon of the 29th, the wind and rain stopped completely as the centre of the hurricane David passed over us. Half an hour later, with a change of direction, wind and rain started up again wildly and continued for another couple of exhausting hours.

Meanwhile our old car, brakes on and in gear, was lifted by wind and floods to jam against a stubborn little bush. All of it was found water- and mud-logged, and up to now, three weeks later, its restoration is incomplete. The manual labour we had to perform was terrific. Aside from baling and mopping like shipwrecked people, we had to worry about eating and feeding the pets when morning came. Our battery radio worked; but all island communications -- lights, telephone and local radio -- were cut off.

Then it was daylight. What a sight! We were, it seemed, living in an entirely different land. All the green was gone; the mountains which had seemed so blue and round were now harsh peaks with dead stark trees stripped of leaves. Our stream had changed its course and now ran on the other side of the house, between carport and drive way, which was non-existent -- a tangle of fallen trees. Aside from the volumes of water around us the island of Dominica was a petrified island. Yet it was strangely beautiful. The stillness was absolute. Not a bird to be heard. Later we learned through Radio Antilles that over 90% of the banana crop and most of the coconuts were gone. We ourselves could see the unclimbable 80-foot high coconut trees uprooted and lying like strewn giant matches within a few yards of our house. The great 150 year old chimney made of lovely bricks of the ruined boiling-house was destroyed. The ruins stood there bare with their walls breached in one place. Old orange trees were uprooted and avocado trees and breadfruit trees torn up. Everything was brownish, as if denuded by a forest fire.

For the first two days we saw nobody. We lived mostly on the things we picked up from the ground -- oranges, avocados, coconuts, and rather

green breadfruit. But meanwhile, we had to steel ourselves to bear Hurricane Frederick on the night of 31 August.

We were probably closer to death by drowning under the wet violence of Frederick than under tempestuous David. Floods of rain came in a straight downpour and we had no protection. We were damp and discouraged. I looked for the goats — they stood quietly in the water-swamped fields, miraculously alive with coconut trees and galvanize around them. The dogs and cats were extremely gloomy. We just bore the floods as stoically as we could, working against water, longing for morning; but the day dawned rainy. And we had no roof. Our food was very low. The avocados, sunscorched on one side, were rotting. Likewise the oranges. It seemed that one of us would have to make a difficult two-mile journey to Roseau, over landslides and tree trunks. Helicopters had begun to appear. Some flew low, and we longed for them to drop just one tiny packet of food when we waved. But they were going on to those in Morne Prosper, Wotton Waven and Trafalgar where the need was greater. We heard messages bearing our names (from abroad) but we could not then reply.

On the third day after hurricane David, I went to town; Robert stayed to work and guard the house. All along the road people were searching for roofing to mend their spoiled houses with. We needed our own badly. Just after Frederick, we began our terrible labour of dragging galvanize sheets which had flown through the air or gone downstream. Robert wore his beautiful English gloves, and I wore my white Government House gloves to protect my fingers which were already chipped and cut. He took one area, I took another. Little by little we dragged back parts of our roof; after a bath in the new stream, I dressed as neatly as possible (some of our clothes were soaked, but O glory! our books were relatively untouched); then I set off up-and-down the once straight road to poor old Roseau, to look for food. I carried an empty leather bag and a haversack. The few young people I passed greeted me warmly. They were going in the opposite direction. I saw the roofs of new Emshall houses off. Bath Estate Big House deroofed. All the splendid new homes *above* St Aroment reduced to nothing. Johnstown (Bath Estate new housing) partially destroyed. The St Aroment road impassable.

Alas, Roseau, my poor birthplace! It was in a horrible state. The British Navy had turned to and shown a fine example by cleaning what they could of the debris-ridden streets. The Anglican Church: only three walls left. Roofs and walls had been torn off both new and old buildings, yet sometimes tiny flimsy houses were undamaged. Jean Rhys's old home,

with its two coats of new paint and mammoth mango tree, was standing proudly. I sat on a step and wrote letters to my two sisters, which I hastily posted in a pillar box outside the damaged post office. I later learned that the GPO was abandoned and the letter box waterlogged. My loving efforts were in vain, and I knew they were worrying. On my next walk into town I sent them and four other people cables. Later I discovered that they had both sent us money, and so had Cousin Rufus in St Kitts, while Adele Emery may have had a premonition — she sent a gift dated 27 August. But on that first visit to town I could not spend any money. All banks and shops were closed for some days. I went to see my cousin Rosalind Volney. She was out, at the Red Cross. Across from her home there was a long queue of highly respectable people lined up to receive their rations, like London bombed-out persons. I went to see Rosalind V. at the Red Cross and got a few things to eat and a pair of old tennis shoes for the hazardous route march back.

We learned that over 60% of our Dominican population were homeless, and that 40 citizens had been killed. Still no news of Robbie. Only four houses in Goodwill had emerged unscathed, but we heard that the Carib Reserve had been less badly hit. The bright expensive new homes built above St Aroment were stripped. In Pottersville and Fond Cole (below) the damage was terrible. But the heart of Roseau itself, looking so broken and threadbare, with piles of junk in the streets and sad hungry people strolling, wrung my own heart. Some of the people did not behave well. They had looted and stolen, invaded the airport to seize goods, held up a lorry with food boxes. A curfew was later imposed. No one on the streets of Roseau after 8 p.m. It is now nearly a month since we have bought bread.

Overnight, many people we had thought of as well-off had become poor. They joined the queues for rationed food and some slept in the Police Station. The STAR is ruined too. Our office has been commandeered by the landlord, quite understandably, for homeless relatives, and there isn't a square inch of space to let in Roseau. Soon we will have to drag our bits of machinery to the already overcrowded cottage, Mill House. This highly personal letter is written not only to explain our condition to anxious enquirers but also explain to our kind and dear relatives, friends, STAR readers and supporters the position we are in. It is now pouring with rain again, but we have a nearly effective roof with only three leaks.

Our first visitors were the sons of Thomas Irish, who walked down to find out if we were alive, bringing a packet of biscuits. Then an English-

man passed by in a jeep, leading a bulldozer with chainsaw. They sliced through the road's fallen coconut trees, but at a certain stage could not go on. The Englishman gave Robert seven eggs and later his kind wife, when the road was clear, brought us two most welcome food parcels from Cousin Rufus and the Langrishes. Now at last we had some roofing nails, some protein, sugar and rice. Joey Vanterpool brought us sugar and flour. Robert baked a little bread.

On my next difficult trip to town, on foot, I sought out Albert Bethel, a STAR schoolboy part timer, and made a compact with him to fix our roof temporarily for \$100. He came next day bringing his little brother, who shortly afterwards fell through the ceiling board into the kitchen, but was miraculously unhurt. Albert made a fine start nailing in the horrible galvanize. In one day,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the house was roof-patched. His own home had been completely destroyed, in 'Johnstown' (Bath Estate). Other visitors were Pat Martin, Gerard Magloire who later gave me a lift, and another Englishman (Cornish) married to the proprietor of La Belle Creole.

One of our boxes contained some V2 US army rations, and very nice tasty and gentlemanly they were. We found that if we added rice and dashine spinach (wonders: the dashine was coming up again!) we could make a meal for three or even four out of one little box. Every day we had to feed three, four or five, for Robbie (who had been sick with a bad cold, not having any warm clothes in the Reserve rains) arrived one day; then there was Albert, and sometimes Aylmer Irish. My job as cook took some ingenuity; Robert's big job was to straighten out with a 3 lb. hammer the devilishly twisted sheets of galvanize before handing them up roofwards.

Then, the miracles. Wonder of wonders! on the fourth day, two shy birds came back. They came by ones, without mates, but suddenly we heard birdsong. Even the humming birds came back tremulously. The kittens caught a young crapaud but didn't kill it — I picked it up by one cold leg and put it in safe grass. Then we noticed the green leaves on the Bohinia (orchid tree) showing; it was partly uprooted, lying on its side. Then marvellous! it began to show its orchid flowers timidly. Today it is alight with blossoms, and several part-fallen orange trees are not only in leaf but bearing orange blossom! The felled bananas are trying hard to make new shoots. The slopes of mountains are showing a little tender new green. But the trees, the huge trees for which we campaigned so ardently, are still dead looking, blasted. Yet the landscape is fascinating. We see to distances which we could never have seen before — buildings

on the Morne, Emshall, high peaks, the road to Trafalgar laid bare!

We have survived. As Robert remarked during our three loneliest of days, everybody has forgotten us — or else they think we are indestructible. We have more help — our Carib son is back. Yet we ask everybody to be patient with us because our burden is still very heavy and we don't know what the morrow will bring. Fetching water from our new stream, boiling it to drink, trying to do the interminable mud-detaching and cleaning jobs ... all these are only part of the work.

The good thing: the true affection shown by Dominican relatives abroad for those who suffered under hurricane David; and the tremendous compassion shown by individuals and even nations towards our stricken land.

The bad thing: attempts to gain a quick profit out of the hurricane. We know that much public money will come in. But we hope and trust, and will try to watch, that it is not misspent.