

BELIZE :

An Introduction

Bruce Ergood
Ohio University

- BELIZE, CASE STUDY FOR DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL AMERICA.* By Julio A. Fernández. (Aldershot, Hampshire: Avebury, 1989. Pp. 112. \$38.95.)
- BELIZE, A NEW NATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA.* By O. Nigel Bolland. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986. Pp. 157. \$26.50.)
- BELIZE: A COUNTRY GUIDE.* By Tom Barry. (Albuquerque, N.M.: Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, 1989. Pp. 75. \$8.95 paper.)
- BELIZE: ETHNICITY AND DEVELOPMENT.* (Belize City: SPEAR, 1987. Unpaginated. \$5.00.)
- NATIONAL CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS CONFERENCE.* (Belize City: SPEAR, 1988. Pp. 58. \$5.00.)
- BEKA LAMB.* By Zee Edgell. (London: Heinemann, 1982. Pp. 171.)
- THE SINNERS' BOSSANOVA.* By Glenn D. Godfrey. (Benque Viejo del Carmen, Belize: Cubola Productions, 1987. Pp. 269.)

Students of Latin America have become accustomed to reading book blurbs and tables of contents of works about Central America that make no mention of Belize. Two recent examples are the seventh volume of Leslie Bethell's *Cambridge History of Latin America* (1990) and John Booth's and Thomas Walker's *Understanding Central America* (1986). Similarly, when newscasters report meetings of the Central American heads of state, neither former Prime Minister Manuel Esquivel nor Prime Minister George Price are mentioned. As Wilfred Elrington has characterized it, Belize is the omitted land.¹

Although many Latin American social scientists and the news media may choose to "omit" this "new nation in Central America," the number of books that have been published about Belize recently is impressive. They include political histories, anthropological studies, and symposia on Belizean issues. In addition, two novels by Belizean authors have appeared, the most recent by Glenn Godfrey, who is presently a minister in the government.

1. Wilfred P. Elrington, "Belize in Central America and the Peace Process," in the SPEAR collection, *Belize: Ethnicity and Development*, p. 1.

This review essay will cover three sociopolitical monographs, two collections on Belizean issues, and the two novels noted. All were written by Belizeans except for two monographs by U.S. authors (Nigel Bolland and Tom Barry). Reading these seven works makes it painfully clear, at least to this reviewer, that real differences exist between the viewpoints of Belizean and U.S. analysts.

Histories are written either by insiders or by outsiders. As John Higham has observed, "The insider draws on a special empathy, an inward familiarity that the outsider may never attain."² This kind of insider's perspective is clearly evident in Julio Fernández's *Belize, Case Study for Democracy in Central America*. For example, he writes, "The sight of the cattle grazing in the pastures of Corozal and Cayo Districts is beautiful to behold for any Belizean who grew up thinking meat was the Spam enjoyed on Sunday evenings" (p. 41). Further on, he notes the problems of "foreign teachers [American Jesuits] instilling a foreign culture and materialism in the local youth" and the many graduates who migrate to the United States (p. 29).³ The concern Fernández expresses is that of a person who has experienced the system from within, a perspective he presents with conviction. Only a local would tell us that the Fort George (*the* hotel in Belize City) "has built a new boat dock to facilitate yacht-sized craft" (p. 57).

The two SPEAR volumes under review were published in Belize, and their articles (with one exception) were written by Belizeans. SPEAR (the Society for the Promotion of Education and Research) is an issue-focused community-action organization whose agenda has drawn support from educators, writers, government officials, and left-of-center political activists. For the past two years, SPEAR has published papers presented at its annual meeting. Not surprisingly, one finds disagreement on several issues, but mainly on the role of Belizeans' ethnicity or race in establishing social status and on ethnic conflict as a barrier to establishing national unity. Both symposia provide ample evidence of "turf familiarity" and close identification with the issues. This reviewer finds such writing a refreshing antidote to works that too often sacrifice convictions to scientific detachment or neutrality.

But lest one be too devoted to the Marc Bloc school of history centering on people,⁴ let us give the outsiders their day. As Higham has observed, "The outsiders . . . may bring a more critical attitude."⁵ It is here that authors Nigel Bolland and Tom Barry shine.

2. John Higham, "The Pot That Didn't Melt," *New York Review of Books*, 12 Apr. 1990, p. 11.

3. Presumably, Fernández is among this group whose exodus he laments.

4. As Natalie Z. Davis wrote about Mark Bloc, "History's central subject . . . was not political events . . . but human beings." See Davis, "A Modern Hero," *New York Review of Books*, 26 Apr. 1990, p. 27.

5. Higham, "The Pot That Didn't Melt."

Bolland is the more knowledgeable of the two about Belize. He has written extensively on colonialism, labor, and nation building in the former colony and now independent state. His colleague and coauthor of an earlier work, Assad Shoman, founded SPEAR and serves on its board. One SPEAR report characterized Bolland as “an honorary Belizean.” A frequent visitor and friend of many in Belize, Bolland easily could have added some local color to his well-written brief historical analysis of the development of British Honduras into Belize. In *Belize, A New Nation in Central America*, Bolland pieces together historical material with critical insight to produce what I consider the best of a handful of historically based social analyses on Belize. But although his brevity is pleasing, it is without wit.

Tom Barry, in contrast, appears to know little about Belize. His *Belize: A Country Guide* shows that he has gone to authoritative sources (namely SPEAR) and apparently has talked with highly visible and accessible bureaucrats and entrepreneurs. Barry’s information is largely up-to-date as a country guide should be. But for those who have known Belize well over time, his work lacks a feel for the country and reference to its people. This shortcoming, compounded by numerous errors of fact, detracts from an otherwise useful compendium for the first-time visitor.

History and Political Development

The titles under review here are almost self-explanatory. Fernández’s *Belize, Case Study for Democracy in Central America* is a somewhat passionate treatise meant to raise awareness of the difficult struggle this tiny country continues to experience in its pursuit of independence and democratic governance. The work is well documented and presents Belize as a mature, independent state despite its limited influence in Central America and heavy dependence on the United States. Fernández treats both the major political parties with respect, revealing no personal preference.

A few minor errors can be pointed out (referring to sugar mills as *milpas* and the Cayo District office as Cayo rather than San Ignacio, omitting San Ignacio from his otherwise complete map, and calling the U.S. Congress the U.S. Legislature). But the main fault I find with the book is Fernández’s reluctance to discuss the ethnic problem that a 1987 *Amandala* editorial described as having “disturbing implications for longer-term social stability.”⁶ Social stability is part of the political process that Fernández is addressing, yet he avoids the ethnic issue. At the time Fernández was writing his book (around 1988, the last years of the Es-

6. Editorial, *Amandala* (Belize City), 16 Jan. 1987, p. 2.

quiel government), SPEAR had already hosted two annual conferences on this issue. Notwithstanding the omission of this crucial topic from Fernández's study, its discussion is central to the democratic process he is analyzing (compare pp. 19–22).

Another weakness of *Belize, Case Study for Democracy in Central America* is Fernández's overreliance on political histories and tracts. Because he also discusses religion, education, the media, industry and labor, and other topics, the lack of references to sources dealing specifically with these subjects is lamentable. The material is available in the Belizean National Archives, shelved along with many of the sources he cites.

Sociologist Nigel Bolland provides an excellent introduction to this small but complex country in *Belize, A New Nation in Central America*. His short synopsis of Maya settlements, the story of the Baymen, the logwood trade, and the intermittently stormy relations with the British Colonial Office is accurate but not overbearing. Culture and its coloration are treated in one section, then the economy, then politics, a structure somewhat reminiscent of Max Weber's "holy trilogy" of class, status, and power. Bolland uses historical and census data well. The latter provide the basis for much of his discussion of population characteristics, although he makes no reference to the statistical abstracts of official government sources from which the data came.

Several minor criticisms of an otherwise excellent book can be made. Bolland refers to the Anglican Church as a sect (p. 46) and speaks of Prime Minister Price's willingness to discuss an issue in the present tense (p. 136). Finally, Bolland refers to British Honduras as Belize throughout, despite the fact that the colony or nation was known as British Honduras (in contrast to its neighbor, which is still often referred to as Spanish Honduras) until either the 1954 constitution or home rule in 1964. To refer to the former colony using the name of the present independent state is to place in the uninformed reader's mind a set of propositions, political values, and expectations that were not present prior to home rule. This is clearly a conscious choice on Bolland's part, but I think it unwise as well as technically inaccurate.

While *Belize, A New Nation in Central America* contains extensive information and some discussion of the processes by which problems are being resolved, I would have welcomed a presentation of several of the major issues in Belize today. Bolland knows these subjects well, and his insights would have been most welcome. To cite one important issue, refugees are far more than a demographic variable. They are changing the complexion of Belize. Spanish is now heard everywhere, and tortilla factories are found even in Belize City. My own study showed that fully 55 percent of the sample (a survey of 459 Belizeans) view refugees as a problem: 22 percent stated that refugees are taking jobs, and 23 percent

said they are causing an increase in crime.⁷ Bolland mentions the program called Valley of Peace Resettlement, cosponsored by the UN High Commission on Refugees, in his discussion of land development, but he makes no reference to its goal of ethnic integration or to what I view as its failure in this regard.

Another major issue is that of a national language. English is the official language, and Bolland states that more than half of the population speak English (he is presumably using 1980 census figures). But the statement is misleading because the dominant language of use is actually Creole. The 1980 census, however, did not list Creole as a language. My survey showed the following breakdown on the language spoken most frequently: English is spoken most by 30 percent of Belizeans, Spanish by 29 percent, and Creole by 28 percent. Moreover, more citizens speak Creole at home than English (30 to 26 percent), and Creole was learned first by more of the population (26 to 23 percent).⁸

Although these differences are not great, Creole is clearly a major language. It is also more than a "racial" or ethnic group. It is an issue, and the wide use of Creole in the schools has also become an issue. Former Prime Minister Manuel Esquivel, a former teacher at St. John's College, knew the issue well. When I asked him if a bilingual educational policy was imminent, his response was unequivocal. "No," he replied, "English is our language and it *is* the language of instruction in the schools, period." Others in government were not of the same mind. One concurred with Bolland that many Belizeans are trilingual and wanted to see the nation of "Babel" reappear in Belize. My point is merely that language and national ethnic integration are inseparable, a matter that should have been more forthrightly presented as a real, substantive issue. At the same time, I applaud Bolland's ability to remain silent on all the personal and political scuttlebutt that makes up 70 percent of the weekly news in the "newspapers." Bolland does discuss the racial and ethnic issue at length in the 1987 SPEAR proceedings also under review here.

A Guide with a Viewpoint

Tom Barry's *Belize: A Country Guide* is not merely a country guide. The publisher, the Inter-Hemisphere Education Resource Center, also produces *The Central American Fact Book*, and Barry sits on the center's board. This slim volume seems to be a politically liberal treatise promoting Belize nationhood masquerading as a country guide. One asks, "A guide to what?" The answer seems to be, to knowing and understanding Belize

7. Bruce Ergood, "The Belize National Survey," *International Third World Studies and Review* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1989):263-76.

8. *Ibid.*, 265.

as seen through the eyes of Barry's sources: SPEAR, Bolland, Third World apologists, and Latin American labor organizations (see p. 74 and chapter footnotes). The book is thus a guide to one view of Belize.

The organization of the publication is commendable nevertheless. Barry appears to be heavily indebted to SPEAR, Bolland, and governmental publication for his information on the history, the economy, and the contemporary scene. As already noted, however, Barry is clearly unfamiliar with Belize. The work lacks any reference to even the standard histories, like those of D. A. G. Waddell, Narda Dobson, or C. H. Grant.⁹ Belize's membership in the United Nations and its expected participation in the Organization of American States in the 1990s go unmentioned. Barry's presentation of the media does not include Omar Oliveira's extensive work, focusing instead on the several newspapers, journals, and one television production studio. The many existing critical and descriptive studies also go unmentioned, apparently unknown to Barry. Even the readily available anthropological study on Caye Caulker is missing from Barry's discussion of the Northern Fishermen's Cooperative.¹⁰

To Barry's credit, he provides an excellent list of volunteer and community organizations and agencies (nongovernmental organizations), thus injecting a human element into a volume otherwise devoid of human interest. The numerous minor errors reinforced this reader's opinion that Barry does not know Belize well: he refers to large estates in Belize as *latifundia* (p. 50); the Swing Bridge downtown was built in 1923, not 1961 (p. 2); Caracol, not Xunantanich, is the major Mayan site that will soon emerge as the "undisputed Queen" (p. 45); and the Maya population get twice as much coverage as the Creoles although there are twice as many Creoles in the country.

Barry's choice of reference sources and other clues might lead the reader to conclude that he favors the Peoples' United Party (PUP), that of SPEAR founder Assad Shoman and many of Barry's other sources. He does not discuss alleged censorship of the press, the national economic well-being claimed by the other party, or Creole flight. Nor does he mention the Government Information Service (a major news source through its widely distributed magazine *Belize Today*), which was accused of being too pro-government, that is, of favoring the United Democratic Party (UDP). In his discussion of the UDP government's attempt to shut down the *Belize Times*, Barry neglects to tell the reader that the *Times* is the outspoken organ of the PUP and is housed in the same building.

9. D. A. G. Waddell, *British Honduras* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Narda Dobson, *A History of Belize* (London: Longman Group, 1973); and C. H. Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize: Politics, Society, and British Colonialism in Central America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

10. Anne Sutherland, *Caye Caulker, Economic Success in a Belizean Fishing Village* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986).

These omissions are emphasized because they show the author to be unfamiliar with Belize yet very familiar with members of one political party. Were the volume not published by the Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, the masked political bias might be excused. In this case, however, it should have been stated.

Issues

SPEAR is a most welcome political-action organization. In only three years of existence, it has hosted annual symposia on topics of major concern to the nation, provided leadership in community organization, and published *Spearhead*, a quarterly newspaper of news, information, and opinion. SPEAR maintains an office with a library and a capable staff in downtown Belize City. It is funded largely by European foundations.

Although not widely available, the proceedings from the first two SPEAR annual conferences are must reading for anyone wanting to understand contemporary Belize. The first volume, *Ethnicity and Development*, contains fourteen papers, seven on each topic. Contributors include academics, lawyers, journalists, government officers, archaeologists, anthropologists, and linguists. The list is an intellectual "who's who" in Belize, with few omissions, and the points of view presented are as varied as the list of contributors.

In *Ethnicity and Development*, the articles based on historical information are freer of emotional attachments than those presenting critiques of contemporary practices. Thus the papers on the Maya, rituals of the Garifuna (a dominant ethnic minority), mestizos in the North, even the French in Belize are interesting but hardly controversial. Yet in analyses of current labor organizations or intergroup relations, for example, one finds sharp disagreement over how to interpret what is happening in Belize. Harriot Topsy, the Canadian-trained Commissioner of Archaeology, argues that racial and ethnic fever has afflicted his homeland: a war is going on between several ethnic groups, and the majority Creoles (who claim 40 to 45 percent of the population) are leaving the country as a result. Meanwhile, demographer S. A. Robert of the Government Statistic Office argues that the population will stabilize by the year 2000 and that this population void will be filled by Central American migrants coming for agricultural work (which Creoles find not to their liking). Robert believes that these immigrants will be accepted in Belize, a prediction many observers doubt in view of current native hostility.

The second part of *Ethnicity and Development* is a collection of articles on the development theme: why co-ops fail (family ties are the key to labor organization success);¹¹ the history of the United General Work-

11. A similar point on the centrality of familial relations for economic enterprise success is made by Sutherland and Laurie Kroshus Medina in one chapter of *Caye Caulker*.

ers Union (UGWU), which recently amalgamated two major unions, and the crises plaguing it two years after its founding; the women's movement; and "Belize in Central America and the Peace Process," a provocative discussion of Belize's nonrole in Central American affairs, save as a possible launching base for American military actions. These articles demonstrate that the Belizean intellectual community is alive and well.

The second SPEAR volume, *National Cross-Cultural Awareness*, discusses the Caribbean cultural dilemma. Respected Belizean educator Alexander Bennett contributes the first essay, "Inter-Ethnic Relations in Belize." His point is that everyone in Belize is an ethnic: the early British (white) settlers, their slaves, the emergent Creoles, the later arriving Garifuna, Mexican Yucatán refugees, and others. Thus none can claim native status. Bennett admits at the outset that "ethnic tension . . . exists in our country" (p. 20), but he credits emergent nationalism and the expansion of secondary schools to the districts (hence educational enlightenment) as the two major factors working to break down the walls of ethnicity.

The second essay was written by Joseph Palacio, a resident tutor at the University of the West Indies, and is entitled "May the New Belize Creole Please Rise." It directs attention to the problem of Creole ethnicity being equated with social class. Palacio concludes that class has assumed greater importance since emancipation in 1838 and goes on "to exhort the new Belize Creole to break away from the confines of a restrictive class system . . ." (p. 35). This emergent new Creole is proof of the ethnic blending that has been taking place and symbolizes the escape from social status defined by ethnicity, a colonial heritage being put aside by the "new Belize Creole" (p. 38).

This volume also provides a summary of the discussion stimulated by the two papers. A variety of topics are raised and criticized: color versus socioeconomic class, new Creole versus old Creole, the generally accepted Caribbean Creole, even the generally accepted definition of English speakers claiming African heritage as Caribbean Creoles. If these articles are indicative of the ferment going on within the intellectual community in Belize, readers will eagerly await publication of the SPEAR conference papers presented in October 1989.

Two Belizean Novels

Only in the context of the foregoing social and political picture can one review the two novels set in Belize (probably the only two novels by Belizeans). Those who would enjoy the richness of Zee Edgell's description of Creole life in Belize City and the complex web of fact and myth woven by Glenn Godfrey must know something about Belize.

Edgell's *Beka Lamb*, published in 1982, is still hailed as the major

Belizean novel. Recounting the trials of a girl's growing up, the novel's local color and ample sprinkling of place names and events excite readers who can identify with these places and events. Edgell resisted using the Creole language, making the novel easier to read, although less authentic for some. Yet Creole life is no less evident. Not surprisingly, one can find in the novel hints of anticolonial feelings and ethnic tensions, the same issues at the forefront in Belize today.

Glenn Godfrey's *The Sinners' Bossanova*, which was published in 1987, is not in the same literary league as *Beka Lamb*. It contains much excitement in its three or four plot lines but little character development or mental challenge for the reader. While it is easy to sense Belizean reality on each page, the novel may leave a bad taste in the reader's mouth regarding Belize. One is introduced to low life, morality on a similar plane, and high stench. The harmony of city life is drowned out by the dissonance of greed, foreign intervention, and magic. A friend summed it up nicely by saying, "It would make a good B movie."

Thus in the realm of fiction, Edgell's fine *Beka Lamb* can stand alone, but Godfrey's adventuresome *The Sinners' Bossanova* is not recommended for those who do not know Belize. Much in both novels will be missed by those unfamiliar with the country. I would recommend that those seeking to understand Belize read Bolland's *Belize, A New Nation in Central America* and complement it with Fernández's *Belize, A Case Study for Democracy in Central America*. They can also enliven Barry's *Belize, A Country Guide* by perusing the SPEAR proceedings. In this manner, readers will benefit from both insiders' familiarity and outsiders' critical detachment in learning about Central America's newest democracy.

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Texto:

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Comentarios:

Alfredo LÓPEZ AUSTIN: *Del origen de los mexicas: ¿nomadismo o migración?*

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