

WHAT IS TO BE DONE:
Recent Research Guides and Bibliographies
for Central America and the Caribbean

David McCreery
Georgia State University

- RESEARCH GUIDE TO CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN. Edited by KENNETH GRIEB. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. Pp. 431. \$35.00.)
- CARIBBEAN ECONOMIC HANDBOOK. By PETER D. FRASER and PAUL HACKET. (London: Euromonitor Publications, 1985. Pp. 241. \$70.00.)
- BIBLIOGRAPHY OF COMMISSIONS OF ENQUIRY AND OTHER GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED REPORTS ON THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN, 1900-1975. By AUDREY ROBERTS. (Madison: Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Materials, 1985. Pp. 89. \$15.00.)
- UNIVERSITIES OF THE CARIBBEAN REGION: STRUGGLES TO DEMOCRATIZE. By BARBARA ASTON WAGGONER and GEORGE R. WAGGONER. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986. Pp. 310. \$55.00.)
- CUBA, 1953-1978: A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL GUIDE TO THE LITERATURE. Edited by RONALD H. CHILCOTE. 2 volumes. (White Plains, N.Y.: Kraus International Publications, 1986. Pp. 1387 in 2 vols. \$295.00.)

The flood of material about Central America published in the last decade is nothing short of astonishing, and it shows no evidence of letting up. Inevitably, much of it is rubbish, the instant analysis of overnight experts and the fevered tracts of the committed but uncritical on the Left and the Right. But some, and probably a growing proportion, of the recent output is quite good. Central America is for the first time attracting a substantial number of high-quality graduate students, and immigrant scholars from other Latin American specialities are finding the questions and the funding possibilities of research on the region attractive. There remains, however, one aspect of Central America still grossly underattended. The sense of crisis, reminiscent of attention to Cuba in the early 1960s, as well as the relentless quest for immediate answers to what are perceived as current problems have fostered little attention to the region's history.

To investigate and write the history of Central America is not a simple or a short-term undertaking. The eighty-three pieces in Kenneth Grieb's edited *Research Guide to Central America and the Caribbean* make this clear, while going some distance toward remedying the problems involved. The *Research Guide* divides about half and half between the two areas and includes essays on research needs and possibilities, generally organized by country for Central America and by topic for the Caribbean, as well as numerous archive descriptions. Although the volume came out in 1985, most of the authors wrote their pieces in 1977 and 1978, and only a few had the opportunity to update them prior to publication. This time lag makes the book itself something of a historical artifact. For example, Gordon Lewis voices baldly in "An Appraisal of Caribbean Scholarship" the dominant *mea culpa* of the seventies: "The Anglo-Saxon tradition [of history writing] is stolid, even dull, tremendously industrious but lacking the imaginative dimension; the Continental tradition is lively, even romantic, concerned with the totality of human experience" (p. 254). Other essays emphasize multidisciplinary approaches and call for attention to such "new histories" as oral tradition, quantification, and women and minorities. But whereas today a publication such as the *Caribbean Economic Handbook* (largely a collection of statistics intended for business and journalistic purposes) takes for granted if not Marxism then its close cousin, "dependency" analysis, the seventies remained suspicious of the "Continental tradition" of Marxism. Studies of rural Nicaragua, for example, seemed of dubious value because "much of the available material [was] written from a Marxist perspective" (*Research Guide*, p. 61). Ironically, the *Research Guide* contains no mention of ethnohistory, one of the brightest specialities to blossom during and survive the seventies. In the years before the current boom, too, most of the writers felt it necessary to argue passionately for the validity of studying Central America: "Problems important not only to Latin America but to the whole of the Third World manifest themselves in peculiarly acute forms in the fabric of the nation's changing situation" (*Research Guide*, p. 26).

It is indicative of the continued underdevelopment of Central American historiography that a lapse of eight or ten years between writing and publishing does not seriously impair the usefulness of Grieb's volume. In fact, Kenneth Finney's piece on Honduras, reworking Gershenkron, argues for the potential "advantage of [historiographical] backwardness: By choosing topics carefully and working up research designs skillfully, scholars who henceforth pursue Honduras history since 1823 should be able to avoid the interpretative false starts and conceptual dead ends which have sidetracked their more proliferate fellow Latin Americanists" (p. 44). Promising as this approach may

sound, the fact is that, at least in the present case, the disadvantages of backwardness weigh heavily against the attractiveness of a near clean slate. With the partial exception of Costa Rica, which in the last two decades has developed a flourishing, if occasionally narrow and self-obsessed, historical research and publishing industry, ignorance of the history of the region is so vast that it is often difficult to know where to begin. Basic institutional and political history remains extremely weak, and historians "can scarcely be said to have identified, let alone analyzed, underlying social, economic and cultural issues" (p. 60). It is difficult to effectively write the "new" history without first having a substantial base in the "old" history.

The problem in part is one of critical mass. Without monographs, it is difficult to generalize, or at least to generalize with much utility, but such generalizations are themselves necessary to intelligently develop monographic topics or to tie these to broader concerns. Whereas normally the two forms move forward more or less in dialectical tandem, with so few people working on the history of Central America, progress continues to be very slow. Except in Costa Rica, there is no local tradition of extended archival research. Central Americans find little research money available and few opportunities for secure, or often even physically safe, employment commensurate with advanced training in history. Books are published in small runs, and most libraries are depressing chaos. With deepening economic problems, the situation is likely to continue to worsen. As a result, every aspect of each project of historical investigation must be researched from the ground up, a tedious and time-consuming enterprise often carried out under difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions. Researchers initially attracted to work in the area commonly find after a brief exposure that they can ask the same questions of Mexico's or Peru's past with better chances of answering them.

The situation for the West Indies is somewhat different. Although some writers lament that the region's history is "totally unknown" (*Research Guide*, p. 248), it is clear that those who work on the Caribbean expect and enjoy a level of data quality and availability beyond the dreams of Central Americanists. The non-Spanish islands have benefited, at least in terms of historical research, from being or having been the possessions of relatively advanced colonial powers. The results are clear in the essays in the *Research Guide*, in the tradition of statistical compilation evident in the *Caribbean Economic Handbook*, and in subject bibliographies such as the *Bibliography of Commissions of Enquiry* put together by Audrey Roberts of the University of the West Indies Library. At the same time that the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala was informing the Singer Machine Company in 1916 that President Es-

trada Cabrera considered census data a military secret and did not publish it, the British colonial governments were gathering and publishing investigative reports on the sugar industry, disease and sanitation, prices and wages, immigration, labor relations, and education, and dozens of similar topics. This contrasting approach is fully documented in the *Bibliography on the Commonwealth Caribbean*. Information is inevitably most complete for areas of interest to the colonial power, and historical research has tended to cluster around this same somewhat limited range of subjects. Too, whereas one writer feels able to speak of the historiography of the English-speaking Caribbean as having entered the "creole phase" of local perspectives and attention to Caribbean, rather than metropolitan, concerns (*Research Guide*, p. 339), in those areas that remain colonies (such as the French West Indies), research and publishing facilities are still controlled by and responsive to the priorities of the colonial power.

Central America and the Caribbean do share certain difficulties for historical research. Most of these countries suffer from inadequate and deteriorating local archival resources, the result of unhelpful climates together with underfunding, inadequate storage and restoration facilities, incompetence, and corruption. Realistically, given the per capita incomes and socioeconomic problems of the region, it is a miracle that there are archives at all. In perhaps its most useful section, the *Research Guide* provides thorough descriptions of all of the major and dozens of minor repositories open to investigators of Central America, the Caribbean, North America, and Europe. These pieces generally include information on catalogued and uncatalogued holdings and special collections, on printed and manuscript guides and finding aids, and on access and working conditions. The writers occasionally pull their punches on some of the less savory *costumbres* of certain archives, but then most of them hope to be able to return to work in these archives again.

A second set of problems for the historical researcher are political. These difficulties can be life-threatening, as is occasionally the case in Guatemala and El Salvador, or simply the sort of harassment resulting from racism and paranoid nationalism that Barbara Waggoner and George Waggoner encountered in Guyana while researching *Universities of the Caribbean Region*. Stretching the geographical definition of "Caribbean region" to include with the islands all of Central America (except El Salvador), Yucatán, the coastal departments of Venezuela, Colombia, and the Guyanas, the authors of *Universities* set out to collect and annotate bibliography relating to "debates . . . over the social role of universities, over whether democratization of education leads to loss of quality, over whether justice can be served by allocating scarce re-

sources to graduate education in societies lacking primary schools for large numbers of children" (p. ix). What they found are universities struggling against political violence in Central America, neglect by inland governments along the Caribbean coast of South America, and a heritage of "eleven plus" and "A-level" examinations in the former British West Indies. Unfortunately, this bibliography fails to inspire confidence because of its spotty coverage and such elementary errors as confusing the *HLAS* (*Handbook of Latin American Studies*) with the *HAPI* (*Hispanic American Periodical Index*) (p. xii) or La Ceiba, Honduras, with San Pedro Sula (p. xiii). Much more seriously, *Universities of the Caribbean Region* is marred by severe ethnocentrism: universities are perceived as achieving progress to the extent that they have adopted North American-style core curriculum (*estudios básicos*), abandoned professional faculties for education based on liberal arts, and evidenced "productivity," that is, are successfully turning out graduates in the statutory time period. The extent to which higher education and its institutions play a different role in Latin America than in the United States and the degree to which even a partially completed program may nevertheless be useful to the individual and to society deserves more serious attention than it gets in this work.

Cuba is a special case within the region. The "excellent" opportunities for research in Cuba that Louis Pérez found in his 1978 essay did not, at least for citizens of the United States, long survive the electoral defeat of President Jimmy Carter (*Research Guide*, p. 274). Pérez's more general observation that, except in the area of U.S.-Cuban relations, North Americans have shown little interest in the history of Cuba before 1958 continues to hold true. The renewed restrictions on access and research have reinforced this attitude. By contrast, the "prodigious" amount of material dealing with the years since 1958 (*Research Guide*, p. 272) is nowhere more evident than in the two volumes, ten parts, sixty-five chapters, fourteen hundred pages, and sixty-eight thousand citations (which are regrettably, if understandably, not annotated) in at least a dozen languages of Ronald Chilcote's massive bibliography, *Cuba, 1953-1978*. If there ever was any doubt, it is Castro's Cuba. Simply counting pages is revealing: one finds 196 pages on and by Fidel and 93 for Che, as opposed to 32 on women, 4 on Blacks, 59 on politics, and 155 for the entire topic of economics. Cutoff dates of 1953 and 1978, logical but unhelpful in addressing Pérez's complaint, imply that history begins with Moncada and ends before the full development of many of the interesting events of the middle and late 1970s and early 1980s. These include the "institutionalization" of the Revolution beginning in 1976, Cuban involvement in Africa and Central America, and the debates touched off by the Mariel exodus. In any event, most of the

material gathered in the two volumes is the raw material of history, not history itself. Cuba today finds itself in the situation that threatens to engulf Central America—buried in words but short of history.

None of the books treated in this review would qualify as a “page-turner,” but any historian who leafs through three or four of them and fails to come away with at least a dozen new ideas for research projects is certifiably brain dead.