

WALTER RODNEY, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881–1905* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1981. Pp. xxv + 282. \$26.50 and £22.40; \$6.90 and £5.90 softback)

Walter Rodney's *History of the Guyanese Working People* is not only one of the most detailed accounts of labouring conditions among the agro-proletariat of the British Caribbean, but also a last testament. After Rodney was prevented by Burnham's government from taking up the Professorship of History at the University of Guyana in 1974, he devoted himself to chronicling the neo-enslavement of blacks and indentured East Indians on the white-owned sugar plantations of his homeland in the late nineteenth century, and to an attempt, which gathered momentum in the late 1970s, to bring these very same racial groups into a working-class alliance to confront, electorally, the entrenched Burnham regime. For putting social theory into practice, Rodney paid with his life: he was assassinated by a bomb in June 1980 and this book was published posthumously in 1981.

Rodney opens with an account of the internal and external constraints on the Guyanese working people in the last two decades of the nineteenth century—approximately 50 years after slave emancipation but still within the period of heavy indentured immigration. In particular, he stresses the drainage problem of the Guyana coast whose “waterways must have entailed moving at least 100 million tons of soil” (p. 3). The second set of constraints involve the more obvious ones for a Marxist such as Rodney—international capitalist forces. By the time the book opens, British Guiana was well on the way to becoming Bookers' Guiana; yet despite technological progress in sugar manufacturing, Guiana was already being by-passed by British capitalists in favour of more fertile (and better drained!) soil for investment in South-East Asia.

But if “international price falls drove planters to the edge of distraction and drove workers into the abyss of desperation” (p. 49), why were more and more indentured labourers admitted to British Guiana? Rodney convincingly argues that it was to cheapen the labour cost of the entire working class. Immigrants were not essential to man the plantations after 1880, and even time-expired East Indians came to recognize the role of their indentured compatriots in undermining their own “free” position—a perception acquired at an earlier date by black ex-slaves and their descendants. An urban-rural division of labour evolved: blacks became largely urban; East Indians displaced blacks on the plantations and, later, on village land.

Despite his preoccupation with labouring conditions—though he fails to mention the appalling mortality caused by malaria—Rodney wears his Marxism lightly and has produced a readable, factual and carefully researched book. His refusal to dismiss race as “false consciousness” is particularly refreshing. “The racial dimension to contradictions among the people established itself in the nineteenth century because of a variety of factors: notably the sustained volume of state-aided Indian immigration, the residential separation of the two main racial groups, the mutual unintelligibility of some aspects of nonmaterial culture, the slow rate of diversification of the colonial economy, and the conscious manipulation of the society by those who had state power” (p. 189).

Since 1966 Guyanese sovereignty has been in black (Burnham) hands and the East Indian majority is once more beyond the pale. Any radical black, like Rodney, who attempts to challenge that hegemony gets trapped in the enduring plurality of the society, and most notably by East Indian suspicion and state (Burnham) power.

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DAN STANISLAWSKI, *The Transformation of Nicaragua: 1519–1548* (Berkeley: University of California Publications in Ibero-Americana, Volume 54, 1983. Pp. vi + 162. \$16.00)

The historiography of Spanish America has tended to concentrate on Mexico and Peru, to the detriment of our knowledge about the colonial experience in other Hispanicized

regions of the New World. This is problematical but hardly surprising: all it reflects is that the geographical focus of twentieth-century scholarship parallels closely the political and economic realities of colonial times—resource-rich “cores” like Mexico and Peru were relatively of much more importance to imperial Spain than resource-deficient “peripheries” such as the West Indies or parts of Central America. It is only natural, therefore, that the published literature, when viewed from the periphery, has many *lacunae*.

With respect to Central America, much has been done in recent years to redress this historiographical imbalance. Beginning in the 1960s with the publication of the multivolume *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, progress continued throughout the 1970s with the appearance of major works by, among others, Robert Carmack, Severo Martínez Peláez, Murdo MacLeod, and William Sherman. With a number of excellent contributions already in circulation, including volumes by Christopher Lutz, Robert Wasserstrom, and Miles Wortman, it seems certain that the 1980s will witness further advances in the field. Contributing to this forward movement is Dan Stanislawski's *The Transformation of Nicaragua*.

Written in a fresh, vibrant style by an historical geographer almost as old as the twentieth century itself, the book reconstructs land-life relationships in Western or Pacific Nicaragua at European contact and discusses the profound changes which occurred in native society and the cultural landscape during the first 30 years of Spanish colonial rule. Stanislawski is particularly concerned with assessing the impact of Spanish conquest on Indian culture and welfare. Native communities in Nicaragua declined precipitously in size between 1519 and 1548 not only because of the ravages of Old World diseases on an immunologically defenseless New World population but also because of a ruthless traffic in Indian slaves. The combined effect of these two events is summarized thus:

Whatever the precise population figure may have been at the time of conquest, it was reduced dramatically in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. In 1519 Nicaragua was a thriving garden; but in a little more than one generation, most of its population was gone. Later, because of its emptiness, the country was largely converted into a cattle-run. In some respects, Nicaragua has always been a country fated for calamity . . . but no other event was as catastrophic as its conquest by Europeans. Few humanly created landscapes of the world have been changed as radically as was that of Nicaragua in the second quarter of the sixteenth century (p. 11).

After evaluating the extent and meaning of native demographic collapse, Stanislawski then concentrates on attempts by Spanish colonists and imperial legislation to create order out of chaos by turning, at mid-century, to more responsible forms of government and less rapacious means of exploitation. Based primarily on a detailed analysis of the tax assessments compiled in 1548 by the reformist Crown official Alonso López de Cerrato, three chapters examine tribute areas, items of tribute, and town populations and control of tributes. A fourth chapter scrutinizes the lives of the Spaniards to whom Indian communities paid tribute. The book ends with a brief recounting of major findings and conclusions.

The Transformation of Nicaragua forms part of a monograph series which has few equals in the field of historical geography. Since its inception under the influence of Carl Sauer over 50 years ago, *Ibero-Americana* publications have served the academic community better than any other forum as the voice of the Berkeley School. The ideas and findings contained in this research series are among the most significant and most enduring contributions made by twentieth-century Latin Americanist scholarship. While the dissemination of inquiry, in whatever form, is all important, one regrets that the University of California Press has not maintained its customary high standards of presentation in *The Transformation of Nicaragua*; the illustrations, printing and editing compare unfavourably with its distinguished *Ibero-Americana* predecessors. On a more positive note, one can only marvel at the energy and draw inspiration from the example

of a man who, with several books on the historical geography of Mexico and Portugal behind him, is still publishing at age 81. Rumour has it, furthermore, that the author is about to hand over another manuscript, on early colonial Guatemala, to the printers. Although an assiduous student of Latin deed and temperament, the notion of *mañana* is clearly not one Dan Stanislawski has chosen to live by.

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JOHN R. STILGOE, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. Pp. xiii + 397. \$29.95)

This is a book written by, for, and about those who watch trains. Taking the half century before the rise of the automobile in the 1920s, Stilgoe argues that railroads fashioned a new "built environment" that radiated corridor-like from the great metropolitan centres to encapsulate the nation with an enlightened system of values based on appreciation, rather than mistrust, of industrial technology. Stilgoe thus relegates to a more distant past Leo Marx's "machine in the garden" thesis, suggesting instead that the tensions Marx described vanished after the 1880s as Americans grew increasingly fascinated with trains, tracks, signals, depots, factories, bridges and all the other forms of this new "metropolitan space".

Stilgoe tells his story largely through the writings of those who viewed the scene from a Pullman car window, or from a promontory above a smoky railroad yard, rather than from the observations of railroad men. We learn, for example, that F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote lovingly about railroads, Thomas Wolfe was fascinated, Sinclair Lewis was mesmerized, Henry James was beguiled, and Theodore Dreiser was transfixed and also stood in awe. Thoreau grumbled, as might be expected. Stilgoe is undoubtedly correct in believing that what these authors wrote could equally summarize what millions of others felt as they stood at trackside watching one of the great steam-powered limiteds charge past with a precious cargo destined for places the train watcher could only dream of visiting. But was there more to it than thrills?

Stilgoe's sensitivity to the train-watcher's aesthetic is matched by his self-imposed avoidance of any source materials that would explain why these impressive machines and structures existed at all. He suggests (p. xi) that to do otherwise would have been to write a book on railroad corporate finance. This forces Stilgoe to view his subject through the eyes of the aficionado, limiting himself to the role of appreciative bystander rather than reflective critic. Only in his chapter on the rise and fall of the railroad landscaping movement, where Stilgoe assumes the professional stance of the landscape architect, is there any attempt to explain why the built environment took on the appearance that so fascinated the public.

Although Stilgoe correctly sees corporate decision-making in the standardized designs for country depots, he misses the repetitive motif in much of the rest of the metropolitan corridor. Had it not been for the rivalries between railroad corporations many of the corridors would not have existed nor would they have been so similar to one another in form and function. Stilgoe neglects one of the best examples of corridor forms, the railroad-created town plat. Having chosen instead to view the country town through the eyes of a Sinclair Lewis or Sherwood Anderson, Stilgoe's focus is too narrow to see the power inherent in his own thesis.

The author views all of this from his own, familiar ground, the urbanized Northeast with its great terminals, industrial zones, commuter suburbs, outlying cities along the tracks, and dying hill-country villages that never were reached by the railroad. This gives a pleasing geographical order to the book's chapters, but lends an erroneous impression that the metropolitan corridor diminished to the vanishing point with distance from the city. As his photographic evidence makes clear, however, the real metropolitan corridors were those on the periphery, where railroads created their own landscapes rather than