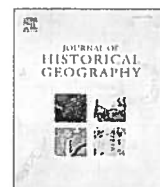




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## Review

**W. George Lovell, *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala: A Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500–1821*. Fourth edition. Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015, xviii + 317 pages, CAD\$34.95 paperback**

This fourth edition of George Lovell's finely crafted historical geography of northwest Guatemala arrived on the 30th anniversary of the first edition. When the first edition appeared, Guatemala was well into its third decade of civil war. This year marks the 20th anniversary of an uneasy peace. The *plus ça change* dictum seems almost custom-fitted to capture the Guatemalan experience and reality. But since the outright 'cessation of hostilities' in 1996, there have been some modest changes. One particularly salutary development has been the increased attention directed to Guatemala and its sordid history, past and present. Lovell's efforts through multiple books, book chapters, and articles have played a role in this global exposure. And agreeably, this fourth edition speaks both directly and indirectly to this ongoing process of increased awareness and concern of a global audience.

I reviewed the first edition of this book in 1986 in this journal. Then I remarked on Lovell's fidelity to following the dual paths of the Berkeley school demographers and cultural-historical geographers in producing a model of regional historical geography, and for setting high standards for those who might be tempted to follow. I'm hard pressed to think of anyone who has done a better job save for Lovell himself, with the amendments that he has made here to the original edition. He has combed the previous editions for places where new data and interpretations fit. Little has been excised. He keeps the basic structure: part I: The Regional Setting; part II: Contact and Conquest, 1500–1541; part III: The Colonial Experience, 1541–1821, but adds an evocative epilogue in which he affirms the reason he is still distilling Guatemalan colonial history after four decades: 'to understand the country as it exists today' (p. 191). In an expanded set of footnotes (some 600, and anchored at the foot of the page!), he sets the record straight on the value of various primary materials along with a variety of other interpretative issues. The roster of persons saluted for their aid and inspiration has trebled – from a long paragraph to three pages.

Comparing the first and fourth editions chapter by chapter gives an idea of the changes made. Like Guatemala, it is hardly wholesale, but unlike Guatemala it is almost all for the better. The lyrical preface, in which he relates his first encounters with Guatemala, its people and landscapes, has been reworked making it all the more evocative. Arriving at Huehuetenango, in Guatemala's remote northwest corner, Lovell spies an ill-kempt 'three-dimensional relief map forty-four paces in circumference' (p. xii) in the central plaza with tiny metal flags painted with Catholic saints' names identifying communities stuck atop the map's mountainous surface. It was not quite 'love at first site', but the place did have a certain appeal, not the least of which was its largely unexamined

geography and history, understudied archaeology and ethnography, and its status as 'a periphery on a periphery' (p. xiv) in greater Mesoamerican studies. Whether self-acknowledged or not, Lovell could plant his own scholarly flag on this rugged, highland corner of Guatemala, and in relatively short-order, become its prime chorologist, chronicler, and interpreter. This, indisputably, he has done.

One of the features I liked the best in the first edition was Lovell's succinct but sage 'Introduction: Geography and the Past'. In these opening pages he situates his study within the larger trajectory of historical geography. He revisits the debate between Hartshorne and Sauer over the value of the historical, or genetic approach. For Sauer, the historical perspective is central and essential. For Hartshorne it is diversionary. Lovell enlists David Harvey's advocacy of historical approaches to bolster Sauer's position and hints at a synthesis of the cultural-historical and the historical materialist. Subsequent appraisals of Sauer's radical defense of Indigenous peoples and cultures have dispelled the tired characterization of Sauerian geography as 'conservative' or 'reactionary'. On this, Lovell was somewhat ahead of the curve. His second chapter 'Physical and Human Geography' takes us into the physical and human geography of his study area at ground level. Along the way we are introduced to a number of the scholars who have gone before. Like the first chapter, it is brief, but tells what needs to be told to put the reader into the place. His third chapter moves us into the prehistory of the Cuchumatán highlands on the eve of the Spanish Conquest. Little updating is evident, suggesting that little new research has been done since the 1970s, perhaps not all that surprising given that much of the area was a war zone from the mid-70s to the mid-90s. The same could be said about the area for the several centuries prior to the Spanish invasion, but the conflicts involved struggle between Central Mexican invaders and Maya polities. The Spanish Conquest (chapter 4) brought an end to internecine indigenous strife, but the resultant subjugation brought about a grinding, slow motion conflict between native subjugated and alien subjugator that has continued at varying tempos and in various guises up to the present. Lovell updates the scholarship in this chapter, and adds new sections, tripling the length. Chapter 5 assesses the population at Spanish Contact. Little seems to have come to light to recalibrate Lovell's earlier estimate of circa 260,000. He does reference newer literature on the general question of the aboriginal population of the Americas circa 1500.

Part III, The Colonial Experience, 1541–1821 features four chapters and the conclusion. Each deals with a different dimension: politics, economics, agriculture, and demography. It is in these chapters that Lovell has done the most grafting, and it bears fruit in the form of introducing new basic data and fresh interpretations. Still, the overall story remains the largely the same, and perhaps can be summed up in single a word – reduction. The politics of

colonial control required various strategies, but geographical constriction, or the policy of *reducción* or congregated forced settlements provided the substrate. Economic life for the indigenes was reduced to one-way tributary obligations met through various strategies. Agricultural ways were altered, with new tools, crops, and animals introduced, but indigenous control over land or terms of production were reduced. And in demographics, the reduction (most due to disease) was precipitous through the first century, with slow recovery through the next three centuries and a marked acceleration in the next. During the last half century, the pace has slowed, due to war, migration, and modernity. The concluding chapter reduces and reprises the whole, putting this distinctive corner of highland Guatemala in clear relief. The book's one new feature is the Epilogue. This is very useful essay on recent research and sources, commenting on 'recent works that have advanced our

knowledge of Mesoamerica in general and Central American and Guatemala more specifically' (p. 192). Ethnographic work has been done in the Cuchumatán highlands since Lovell first viewed its massive relief. He points to a 'subgenre' – the revisited study, in which an anthropologist restudies a locale studied by another anthropologist some decades earlier. Lovell cites three such examples, each spanning five decades. And Lovell's own work might be seen as sort of an 'auto-revisited' study. But in matters of Cuchumatán geography, demography, and colonial history, Lovell is traversing this scholarly terrain solo. It may be that he has written the definitive monograph, not likely to be improved upon by anyone, including himself.

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