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978-0-521-10141-7 - The Making of Modern Belize: Politics, Society and British Colonialism in Central America

C. H. Grant

Excerpt

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Introduction

The geographical and historical background

Belize occupies an area of 8,600 square miles and is a British possession in the Spanish-speaking sub-continent of Central America. It is bounded on the north and north-west by Mexico, on the west and south by Guatemala and on the east by the Bay of Honduras in the Caribbean Sea. The nearest British-oriented territory, Jamaica, lies about 600 miles to the east in the Caribbean Sea. Along the coastline are a number of cays or coral islets. The coastlands are mostly a few feet above sea-level with numerous lagoons. This ecological situation is compounded by the periodic occurrence of hurricanes in the area. Rivers also abound and two of them, the Hondo and the Sarstun, separate Belize from Mexico in the north and Guatemala on the south respectively. A third river, the Belize, flows from the Guatemala frontier to the Caribbean Sea and has at its mouth Belize City which was the administrative capital until 1970.

The swampy coastlands in the north give way to flat, low, fertile land. They are replaced in the south and west by pine ridges, scrub forests, savannahs and arable lands in a landscape of valleys and mountains which reach 2,700 feet above sea-level. The highlands are less exposed to the fury of the hurricanes than the low-lying coast, and after a hurricane, 'Hattie', devastated Belize City for the second time in thirty years, in 1961,¹ it was decided to relocate the capital some seventy miles inland in the western part of the country and to name it Belmopan.²

The country has a small population of 120,000³ which is concentrated on the coastlands. About 39,000 or 33 per cent of the total population lived in Belize City in 1970. Another 16 per cent or 19,444 inhabited the smaller coastal towns of Corozal (4,724), Orange Walk (5,698), Stann Creek (6,939) and Punta Gorda (2,083). About eighty of the one hundred or so villages in Belize surround these coastal towns and Belize City; they also include the largest villages and together accommodated 45,465 or 38 per cent of the total population. A mere 5 per cent or 6,257 lived in the two inland towns of San Ignacio and Benque Viejo. Approximately 8 per

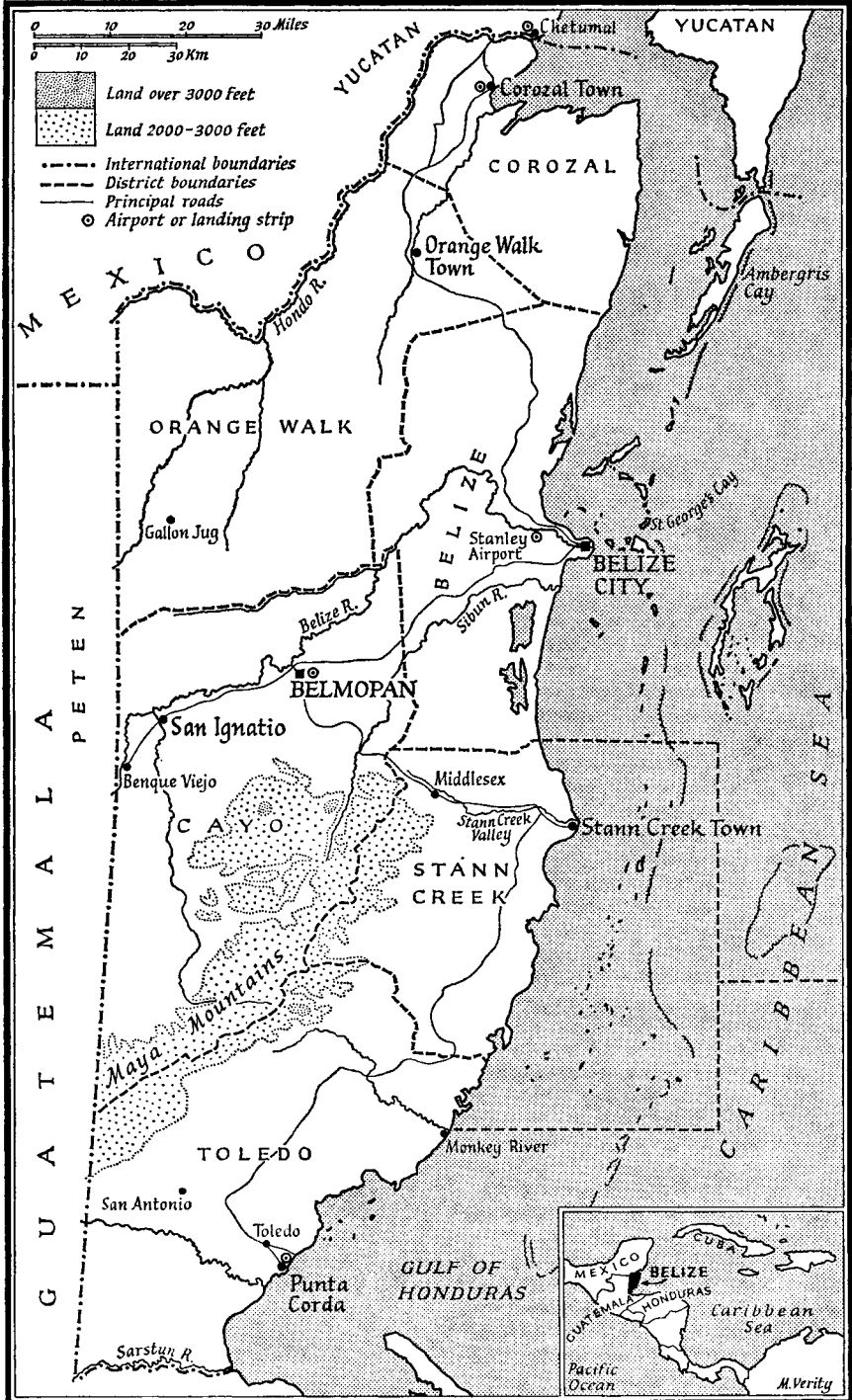
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cent or 9,500 nearby rural residents complete the sum since the ridges and more mountainous areas are virtually uninhabited.

Belize is unusual in the Pan-American area. This is not because her problems and development are different in kind from those of the Central American and Caribbean territories. They are not. The country is typically underdeveloped. From the moment a British settlement was established around 1638 a whole way of life developed on the untrammelled exploitation of man and nature alike – of African slave labour and of the more valuable forest trees: logwood, mahogany, rosewood and sapodilla. The trees were scattered, and extensive forest holdings were an economic necessity. These holdings were owned by the individual settlers but most of them eventually fell into the hands of a single absentee corporate owner. This was the Belize Estate and Produce Company Ltd (BEC) whose headquarters is in London.⁴ It was established in 1875 by the Hoare family;⁵ in 1942 it became a subsidiary of the giant multi-national corporation, J. Glicksten Property and Investment Trust Ltd,⁶ which has more recently become part of a new United Kingdom based conglomerate, the International Timber Corporation. At the time that it was acquired by J. Glicksten and Sons Ltd, the BEC owned more than 1,000,000 acres or one-fifth of the colony.⁷ The properties included some of the more fertile lands that provided access to the forests but were never put to productive use.⁸ Because of its vast forestry and agricultural holdings, the BEC has forced the peasant farmer and forestry worker into a dependent relationship with it. The farmer operates on a minute scale on relatively infertile land and the forestry worker functions at best as a contractor in the extraction of timber from the company's land. Indeed, as part of the dependency syndrome entire villages were established as tenants on company land. Their tenure was also at the mercy of the corporate landlord, and the eviction and the removal of large blocks of population from one estate to another were not unknown. The overall arrangement bore some resemblance to the plantation system in the West Indies. Indeed, Beckford, in a world-wide study of plantation economies, firmly cast Belize in the plantation mould from its inception, even though its main economic activity was non-agricultural.⁹ Even if a different categorization of the forestry economy is preferred, the fact remains that Belize was, in Carey-Jones' words, a 'classic example of colonial exploitation, of taking away and not giving back. . . in the way of permanent improvement and capital development'.¹⁰ From being prized in 1671 as the settlement which 'increased His Majesty's Customs and national commerce more than any of His Majesty's colonies',¹¹ Belize suffered so much at the hands of imperial economic interests that it is considered to have reached 'a

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colonial dead end'¹² by the turn of the twentieth century. As Carey-Jones indicates, the process of decay began with the exhaustion of the forests.¹³ The dismal picture persisted well into the 1950s when there was a compensating rise in agriculture, with each of the two major industries, sugar and citrus, dominated by a single overseas company, the Belize Sugar Industries, a subsidiary of the British Tate and Lyle, and Salada Foods Company, a Canadian concern, respectively.¹⁴ One sector has therefore replaced another as the mainstay of the economy and with it a distinctive feature of the colonial economy remains intact. The emergence of agriculture has also brought to an end perhaps the only important economic difference between Belize and the rest of the West Indies. The sugar industry, which is more important than citrus in terms of value of production, number of wage-earners employed and general influence, is organized on a plantation basis. It has unmistakably placed Belize in what Wagley calls the plantation culture sphere of the Americas¹⁵ and has augmented the country's economic ties with the Commonwealth Caribbean.

Nor does Belize's uniqueness depend on its basic institutions. Its colonial experience has produced political, social and legal institutions that are common to the Commonwealth Caribbean and indeed to the British colonial world. Nor can its claim to a place of special interest in the region be based on its movement for self-determination. Nationalist politics in Belize forms part of the general response to British imperial policy in the West Indies and elsewhere, even though the colony was not the most precocious in the period between the two World Wars.¹⁶ During the economic depression of the 1930s there was less nationalist argument and a lower political awareness than in the West Indian colonies, and Belize stood on the edge of the path of the disturbances that swept the other territories in the region during this decade.¹⁷ Nonetheless, it was by no means a late starter in developing an organized nationalist movement after the Second World War. With little warning, the People's United Party (PUP) and its progenitor, the People's Committee (PC), burst upon the political scene in 1950 under a very young and zealous leadership.¹⁸ This was the same year that a nationalist political party, the People's Progressive Party (PPP) was formed in Guyana¹⁹ and some six years before the ruling People's Nationalist Movement (PNM) emerged in Trinidad.²⁰ In its development, the PUP has manifested many of the characteristics of its counterparts in these territories and other new states.²¹ It gathered momentum with astonishing speed and easily became the dominant force in the country's political life. It has not merely won the six elections that have been held since its inception, but captured almost all of the seats in the first five, with the result that the parliamentary opposition has only since the last election in

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December 1974 been more than a token force. At the same time, however, the PUP could not always count on the full support of strategically important segments of the population.²²

Perhaps more than many of the other ruling parties in the Caribbean, the PUP has had its fair share of conflict with the colonial power before the latter came to terms with the changing political situation. This conflict reached its climax in December 1957 when the PUP leader, George Price, was expelled from the Executive Council,²³ and the situation was not resolved until 1960. The party also shares with many of its kind the experience of rivalry for its leadership that invariably results in a party split. This occurred in 1956 and led to the formation of the Honduran Independence Party (HIP) and the eventual consolidation of the opposition forces into the National Independence Party (NIP) in 1958. It is also possible to trace in Belize the familiar pattern of organizational disarray and fragmentation that overcome opposition parties that have known no experience other than endless electoral rebuffs in the pre-independence period.

Whether they are of the ruling or opposition parties, few political leaders in the West Indies rose from obscurity. Most of them were and are middle-class, either by birth, wealth, education or occupation and confirm the elitist character of political leadership in new states. George Price, the PUP leader, is no exception. His father 'came from an old Colonial family of distinction who were closely identified with the economic, social and religious life of the colony'.²⁴

The elder Price was an auctioneer, a Justice of the Peace and 'had a unique record of outstanding public service'.²⁵ He sent his son to one of the 'select' secondary boys' schools, St John's College, which the Jesuits had established in 1887.²⁶ The young Price aspired to the Jesuit Order and tested his vocation for the priesthood in the United States of America and Guatemala in the late 1930s. On his return to Belize in 1942 he worked as secretary to a local multi-millionaire businessman, Robert Turton, who was an elected member of the Legislative Council from 1936 to 1948. Price was also engaged in the municipal politics of Belize City and was elected to the Belize Town Board in 1947 after an unsuccessful attempt in 1943.²⁷ Price was therefore well established and known when, together with John Smith, a cinema manager and member of the Legislative Council, Leigh Richardson, a journalist and a former primary school teacher, and Philip Goldson, also a journalist and a former civil servant, he formed the People's United Party in September 1950.²⁸ As one of the more influential leaders Price held the key posts of Secretary and Treasurer. He gradually established his pre-eminence as the party lost first Smith in 1951

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and then Goldson and Richardson in 1956 over a protracted struggle for the leadership. From then on it is around his personal influence that the party has developed. He alone can claim a certain natural legitimacy or authority owing to his leading role in the movement for self-government. For it was after the split in 1956 and under his undisputed party leadership that the major constitutional advances occurred.

The concentration of power in Price's hands was to some extent the result of his conflict with the British government. Already weakened by the split, the truncated PUP could not survive further factionalism while it was under siege from 1957 to 1960 without totally destroying itself. Paradoxically, the resolution of the conflict in the party's favour in the 1960s enhanced Price's personal authority to an extent that the party is seen as little more than an extension of his personality. Price's personal hold on the PUP is not an uncommon phenomenon among political parties in the West Indies, especially those which have their origins in a nationalist movement and are still to survive their founders. For example, his counterpart in Trinidad, Eric Williams, has, according to Selwyn Ryan, been accused of 'instituting a personal monarchy and deliberately creating an image of an omnipotent superman'.²⁹

At the minimum, the political culture as a whole in Belize, with its implications for the process of decision-making and the creating of political responses within the society, is a variation on the West Indian theme. This is because at least three broad aspects of the Belizean society are common to the other territories. First, as a legacy of the colonial era a strong element of authoritarianism characterizes the relationship between political leaders and their followers. Despite an outward appearance of egalitarian principles, there is little mass participation in the making of decisions which could affect the total society in fundamental ways. Second, there is the syndrome of 'sociological smallness' which Burton Benedict and others have identified as characteristics of certain small-scale societies such as those in the Caribbean.³⁰ P. J. Wood notes that in this situation 'private roles of kinship and obligation are entangled with public roles of office. . . . Personal antagonism can poison public affairs while disagreement over policy can estrange private lives.'³¹ Such a situation is hardly conducive to public debate and collective responsibility. Third, the economies of these societies are unable to provide a reasonable level of employment to the majority of its citizens. This has tended to increase the importance of the government's role as an employer and dispenser of patronage. Governmental institutions inevitably become ubiquitous and this leads to further accretion of authority and influence to those who govern.

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As in the case of its political culture, there is little that is singular in Belize's constitutional advance. The colony has had three transitory constitution's, in 1954, 1961 and 1964. All were fairly orthodox. The first introduced adult suffrage and a quasi-ministerial or membership system of government, the second a full ministerial system of government, and the third internal self-government.³² At the time of the last constitutional change early independence was anticipated. The PUP government is however deterred from making the final move by the century-old Guatemala claim to Belize.³³ The claim, which was dormant for several years, was revived with varying degrees of intensity after the Second World War, and accompanied with threats of annexation by military action if Belize were to be given independence. In 1968 the dispute defied a diplomatic solution put forward by the United States of America at the request of the two high contracting parties, Guatemala and Britain.³⁴ External threat to a society usually serves to bring together contending forces within it into a common front, but in Belize the effect has been the exact opposite. The PUP's initial response to the claim was not clear and unequivocal, and although it is now unquestionably committed to the view that the country's independence is not negotiable, it has been unable to win the unqualified confidence of various opposition elements in its handling of the problem. The strain on national unity which the claim exerts adds to the PUP's reluctance to end its dependence on Britain's ultimate authority and military strength.

The protracted delay of independence, as distinct from the reason for it, is not peculiar to Belize. The smaller territories in the region have been in a state of constitutional limbo for an equally long period. After the failure of the West Indies Federation in 1961 these territories, doubtful about their economic viability, opted for a political formula that, in the mid-1960s, conceded internal self-government to them and kept intact British control over their defence, and external affairs.³⁵ Any one of these territories can withdraw from this arrangement at any time and become fully independent. Like these Associated States, as they are called, the initiative for arranging the final constitutional conference rests with Belize since the British government has repeatedly stated that the country can have its independence whenever it is ready.

Finally, Belize's distinctiveness is not derived from its geographical position on the coast of Central America in the heart of the Caribbean Basin.³⁶ The position is strategic for providing a link between the Caribbean and Central America but no more so than Jamaica or, to a lesser extent, Cuba.

Belize is unique in that it is a meeting place, a borderland of two quite different cultural worlds. These are the White-Creole-Carib and the

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Spanish–Mestizo–Indian complexes. Together, these complexes give Belize a racial, linguistic and cultural heterogeneity that is unusual in either the West Indies or Central America. The relatively small population consists of such racially diverse groups as the Africans, Caribs, Chinese, East Indians, Europeans, Lebanese and Syrians, Kekchi, Mayan, Waika and Mopanero Indians.³⁷ Its diversity confirms the country's contiguity to Mexico and Guatemala, its colonial affinity to the West Indies and imperial attachment to Britain.

Cultural Groups

Further elaboration of the country's place of special interest in the Pan-American area is hampered by the problem of determining the numerical strength of the two broad cultural groups, classifying them by race and indeed of assessing the value of race as a basis of cultural differentiation. Belize is perhaps one of the few countries in the region in which there is very little up-to-date statistical data on the racial origins of the population. The last population census was taken in 1970, but the available information is preliminary and does not refer to ethnic origins except in the breakdown of the working population, which was 31,465 or 26 per cent of the total population.³⁸ Apart from pertaining to a relatively small section of the population, the data are of limited value in determining the numerical strength of each racial group. Negro or Black, East Indian, Chinese, Syrian/Lebanese, and White are the only racial groups specifically identified. Categories of 'Mixed' and 'Other races' cover the other groups including the Indians. The previous census in 1960 was completely silent on the racial composition of the society.³⁹ This silence is consistent with the PUP government's policy of de-emphasizing racial differences in the pursuit of a common identity: 'Do not say Creole, or Carib, or Mestizo,' Price told an interviewer, 'Use the expressions Afro-Belizean, Carib-Belizean or Maya-Belizean. Or better still, use only the word Belizean.'⁴⁰ The omission in the 1960 census is perhaps also a response to the difficulties of neatly allotting individuals to racial groups in a society where there are no rigid barriers of legal status or social discrimination and where miscegenation among the racial groups is not uncommon.

Some idea of the problems of establishing racial origins and allocation may be gained from the 1946 census.⁴¹ This census divided the population into: Black 22,693 (38.39 per cent), Mixed or coloured 18,360 (31.01 per cent), Aboriginal Indian 10,030 (16.94 per cent), Carib 4,112 (6.94 per cent), White 2,329 (3.93 per cent), East Indian 1,366 (2.3 per cent), Syrian 128 (0.41 per cent), Chinese 50 (0.08 per cent), not stated 15 (0.05 per cent). Those described as black are the descendants of the African

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slaves who were imported mainly from Jamaica and also the more recent immigrants from the Commonwealth Caribbean territories. The white population included the descendants of the early British settlers, and more recent arrivals from Britain, the United States and Canada. It also included persons of Spanish origin whose ancestors migrated as refugees during the War of the Caste in the middle of the nineteenth century to the northern districts, Corozal and Orange Walk, from Mexico.⁴² The 'mixed' or 'coloured' group included the two main sub-groups, persons of mixed European and African descent and persons of mixed European and Indian descent.

Although it reveals the complexity of racial origins, the 'mixed' category cannot cover in two sub-groups the bewildering variety of racial admixtures. There is a significant number of visible cases of individuals who straddle these two mixed categories of European and African, and Mestizo and Indian. It is, however, not possible to arrive at a more precise description of the various intermixtures of races by observing inherited biological characteristics, in particular skin colour, hair formation and facial structure. It is not uncommon for members of a family to display the differing phenotypical characteristics within the society, their various configurations approaching the 'European', the 'Mestizo', the 'Indian' and the 'African'. Such a family can trace its ancestry to Britain and perhaps another European country, Africa, the West Indies, and to one or several of the neighbouring Spanish-speaking republics.

The problem of racial classification is not confined to the middle-range groups. It also exists between two different ethnic groups, the African and the Carib, who are both unmistakably black. To the casual observer the Caribs are not easily distinguishable from the Belizean or West Indian Africans. But the Caribs, who were warlike and driven from St Vincent by their European adversaries, first to the north coast of Honduras and later to Belize, owe their origin to miscegenation between the Arawak Indians from the Orinoco and the African slaves.⁴³

Skin colour and other physical characteristics are therefore not reliable guides to racial origins. Nonetheless they played an important part in determining social and occupational status in the colonial society. The controlling and prestigious positions in the civil service and in business, particularly the foreign-owned, were filled by Europeans and persons of light complexion. This does not mean, however, that every racial group that approximated to the European configuration qualified for leadership in the colonial society. For such a society to function effectively it was necessary for the British colonial oligarchy to assign responsibilities to and confer rewards upon those with whom they felt the closest social and

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cultural affinity and who in consequence could be relied upon to safeguard the existing social and political system. This placed persons of Spanish origin and of Spanish and Indian descent at a disadvantage and at the same time gave upward mobility to the British section of the 'coloured' group and the African population that readily emulated the colonial values.

Sociologically, these cultural considerations further complicated the problem of racial classification. Despite the common racial characteristics between the British colonial oligarchy and the Spaniards, or rather persons of Spanish descent, the latter were always distinguished from 'Europeans'. In fact cultural and social distinction was, and still is, perceived primarily by Belizeans not in racial and colour terms of white and black, but between those who were British-oriented or Creoles and those who were not.

It is in fact less problematic to classify the population numerically by cultural affinity rather than by racial origin. Two valuable indexes are language and geographic distribution of the two broad cultural categories. Both indexes were used in the 1960 census and there is a high correlation between them. As the tables 1 and 2 indicate Belize City is essentially a Creole town and also the home of the majority of this group. To the west of the Belize District the Indians gradually predominate over the Creoles until around Benque Viejo in the Cayo District and the south-western corner in the Toledo District, near the Guatemalan border, the inhabitants are almost entirely Indian. The Mopanero Indians who migrated from the Petan area of Guatemala are concentrated in the rural areas of the Cayo District and San Antonio, which is the largest Indian village in Belize. The Kekchi Indians, who are from the Vera Paz area of Guatemala, have tended to confine their residence to the Toledo District. To the north of the Belize District the settlement pattern is the same. The population of Orange Walk Town, the nearest town to Belize City, is composed of Indians, Mestizos and Creoles, with the former group constituting almost exclusively the rural population of the Orange Walk District. The population of the Corozal District in the extreme north consists mainly of Mestizos in the town and of Indians in the surrounding villages. The Indians in these two northern areas are the descendants of the Yucatan Mayas. The other major cultural group, the Caribs, is concentrated on the south coast of the country in the Stann Creek and Toledo Districts. Stann Creek is almost exclusively Carib and so to a lesser extent is Punta Gorda, the administrative capital of the Toledo District.

As table 1 indicates, over one-third (36.3 per cent) of the total population lived in Belize City in 1960. Jocelyne Kharusi has also pointed out that 'the rate of population increase of Belize City has always been greater than