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in Central America

C. H. Grant

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Frontmatter

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The making of modern Belize

*POLITICS, SOCIETY & BRITISH COLONIALISM
IN CENTRAL AMERICA*

C. H. GRANT

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University of Waterloo

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C. H. Grant

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Lorene
Adèle, Denise and Gayle

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in Central America

C. H. Grant

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations viii *Foreword* ix *Preface* xiii
Acknowledgements xv

Introduction	<i>page</i> 1
PART I: The colonial order, 1638–1949	
1 Colonialism in historical perspective, 1638–1931	29
2 Latent crisis of the colonial order: economic aspects, 1931–1949	61
3 Latent crisis of the colonial order: political aspects, 1931–1949	78
PART II: The decolonization process, 1950–1960	
An overview	123
4 The nationalist upsurge: the People’s Committee in 1950	125
5 Political conflict: scope and dimensions	146
6 The conflict: the climax and resolution	187
PART III: Towards independence, 1961–1974	
7 An overview	227
8 Constitutional advance and imbroglio	233
9 Political parties and the political process	263
10 Multiple external orientations: sentiment and reality	306
Conclusion: decolonization and national integration	325
APPENDIX: Draft treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Guatemala relating to the resolution of the dispute over British Honduras (Belize)	332
Notes	341
Select bibliography	385
Index	390

Cambridge University Press

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

C. H. Grant

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ILLUSTRATIONS

The illustrations appear between pages 160 and 161

1. George Price
2. The Honourable Sir Harrison Courtenay KBE., QC., LL.D.
3. Herbert Fuller
4. Nicholas Pollard
5. Philip Goldson
6. The Honourable Dean Lindo
7. Price being given a hero's welcome in Belize on his return from
London in December 1957
8. The Assembly Building, Belmopan

Map of Belize, *page 2*.

FOREWORD

There is still a great deal to be learnt about the period of European break-out into the Oceanic world, and about its abiding consequences. The labels 'imperialism' and 'colonialism' are convenient, and need not be misleading so long as one remembers that the conquest of empires, the founding of colonies, were only part of the show; the most conspicuous, but not necessarily the most appropriate for a radical analysis of what happened.

There were two factors common to this and to all previous periods of 'folk-wandering': the search for loot, and the search for land. It is easy to trace these characteristic features: the former primarily where armed adventurers broke into the territory of ancient empires, the latter in 'new found lands' where scattered aboriginal populations were pushed aside by superior technique and weight of numbers. Analogous episodes can be traced in human history back to the dawn of literacy and beyond; but this episode was radically new in that the wanderers were also merchants, investors, and in the end industrialists. Even in the first phase the merchants were prepared to invest three or more moves ahead of the ultimate market; to build ships, to hire crews, with which to buy slaves, with whom to open up new lands for tropical agriculture, whose products would sell richly in European markets. And so round the cycle, a cycle lubricated by the growth of an extremely complex international money market.

The effects of these movements of population and investment were complex and dynamic, and the process that created them cannot be reversed. The heritage now exists independently of its history and the receding tide of empire has left castaways who can justly blame long-dead colonizers, but must now lead their own lives.

I am glad that Cedric Grant (himself from Guyana, 'B.G.', to use the old name) introduced me to the story of the country that was known as British Honduras ('B.H.') and recently renamed Belize, when he was a Ford Foundation Fellow at Edinburgh University. In a sense Belize has nothing: a strip of not very fertile Caribbean coast in the path of hurricanes, some sluggish rivers, a large area of tropical forest (looted rather

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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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Foreword*

than harvested), enough archaeological remains to show that a thousand years ago its people were on the fringes of the great Mayan culture. It was a scrap of the Mosquito Coast, a resort of fugitives and broken men; its new name, Belize, is vaguely reputed to be that of an obscure Scottish adventurer called Wallace. There was once (in 1798) a little and decisive sea battle with the Spaniards (the Spanish Field-Marshal was called Arturo O'Neil) at the entrance to its port; but it was virtually outside the colonial wars of the eighteenth century, outside the general history of the Caribbean. It was with difficulty that the British were coaxed, perhaps tricked, into annexing it in 1862: ever since then they have been trying and failing to get rid of it.

Why then study this assembly of some 130,000 descendants of castaways? I have myself been fascinated by Cedric Grant's account because of the complexity of the situation contrived here by the events of history, almost without the intervention of collective human will or reason. There was no loot and no systematic murder of native Indians. There were no minerals to speak of, and therefore no use for slave labour in the mines; no plantations to speak of, and therefore no use for slave labour in cultivation. Slaves were used in the search for valuable timber trees, but this required initiative and work in small groups. Slaves in Belize did not remain so for very long, and the dominant racial group was of mixed mulatto blood, and Creoles, as they are called, moved into the lesser professions and into trade. One of the oddities of British colonial history is that the elite secondary school (the *Alma Mater* of the revolution, in so many colonies and which provided the nationalist leaders) was in this case a Catholic school (St John's College) run by Jesuits from the American Middle West (Irish or German, not highly regarded within the Order, an ex-Jesuit once told me).

This Creole elite can be distinguished quite clearly from the black Caribs, peasant farmers and fishermen, whose legend is that they are descendants of Carib women and of African slaves who escaped elsewhere in the Caribbean. Thus they can claim in a sense to be autochthones, more ancient in lineage than the elite, and they are a substantial influence, now moving in to take a place by the side of Creole teachers in primary education.

Finally, there are the *mestizos*, Spanish speakers of mixed blood, to whom Spanish and Indian languages are more familiar than English. The Premier, and firmly recognized leader, George Price, has an English (or rather Welsh) name, but claims mestizo ancestry, and is proud to press the claim of Indian blood for a share in government. But these are primarily Indians who moved in from Mexico along the northern coast. Their

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C. H. Grant

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Foreword* xi

ancient history does not relate them very closely to the largely Indian state of Guatemala, which has for long contested the legality of Britain's claim to 'the Mosquito Coast', an issue which has become a classic case in international law.

Indeed, where are these descendants of castaways to find a home except in Guatemala? In the days when a federation of the British West Indies was on the agenda they rejected it, fearing an influx of West Indians, culturally alien to a sizeable section of the population. If one looks at the Isthmus on a small-scale map, it seems reasonable to tag Belize to Guatemala: a larger scale reveals that practical connection depends on building a road – a political question – and on finding traffic for a road when built. Commercially, to add nothing to nothing equals nothing; Belize has very little more economic connection with Guatemala than it has with Britain (there are no golden beaches around which to build the economy of a tax haven).

Why then study Belize? What has been written about the place I find of deep interest, yet I should not rank it high among attractive places. Why bother? I can think of three reasons. The first is that in spite of all the fierce and random accidents of history Belize exists. It is people in association with a place: a unique and true entity. It is itself, and nowhere else.

Secondly, it is a meeting place for strands of history. Personal pedigrees do not exist, but if they could be traced for 500 years the threads would lead back to a diversity of cultures, peoples and economies, widely displaced in space and time.

And, finally, there is a future. How far can a social future be chosen and shaped, how far is a social entity merely a leaf driven by the winds and currents of the ocean of history? Belize has set out to sail that ocean in a flimsy and leaky vessel. But so have we all: you too, *hypocrite lecteur*, are in essence a Belizean, *leur semblable, leur frère*.

Glasgow,
July 1975

W. J. M. Mackenzie

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in Central America

C. H. Grant

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

This book is derived primarily from a doctoral dissertation that I completed for the University of Edinburgh in late 1969. In that work I attempted to combine a general political history of Belize in the modern period with a structural analysis of its main institutions such as political parties, trade unions, and local authorities. The broad assessment was dictated by two considerations. First, Belize was and is still largely virgin territory for the social scientist and much of the spade work has yet to be done. Most of the published work on the country is concerned with the juridical aspects of the Anglo-Guatemala dispute, now more than a century old. It is essentially as an adjunct to this dispute that the internal political history of Belize has received attention. Those who take the view that the internal affairs of Belize merit a study in itself have either selected a narrow specialized topic or a part of the country as the unit of analysis. Together, these studies do not provide a composite picture of Belizean society, still less its politics. There have been exceptions, the most notable being D. A. G. Waddell, *British Honduras: A Historical and Contemporary Survey* (1961), Wayne Clegern, *British Honduras: Colonial Dead End 1859–1900* (1967) and more recently Narda Dobson, *A History of Belize* (1973). The first and third works provide little more than a historical overview. The second is more penetrating in its account, which is however confined to the latter half of the nineteenth century. In a way my dissertation picked up the history at this point and as the first attempt to analyse systematically contemporary political developments, particularly after the rise of a nationalist movement in 1950, it was essentially exploratory in character.

The second reason for giving breadth to the study is that spade work of this kind is virtually a prerequisite to fruitful comparisons with territories in the Caribbean that share with Belize its British colonial experience. As Lloyd Braithwaite points out, the institutional differences among the West Indian countries are sufficiently significant for us to guard against generalizations based on the data for one country.¹

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in Central America

C. H. Grant

Frontmatter

[More information](#)xiv *Preface*

Extensive changes have been made to the original work to bring it to its present form. I have reorganized the material so as to avoid the criss-crossing of themes and chronology which was inherent in the combined analysis of a general political history with the analysis of the institutions. There is a greater degree of historical continuity, as is evident in the division of the book into three parts – the Crown colony period, the process of decolonization in the 1950s, and the move towards independence from 1961 onwards. As a result of the rearrangement the interrelationship between institutions is more fully established. I have also recast the study in terms of Belize being a cultural borderland, a meeting place for the British-oriented Creole and the Latin complexes in the Pan-American area, without sacrificing its broad orientation. Finally, I have included developments that have occurred since the dissertation was completed, up to the general election in October 1974.

The task of updating such a study is unrewarding and thankless. In a sense, fundamental changes seldom occur to justify the exercise. Yet I found the urge to undertake it irresistible. In the process I fell into an all-too-common trap. I was unwilling to call a halt although I realized that no published contemporary work is ever completely up to date. The constant revision and reworking was eventually overtaken by a constitutional event of symbolic importance. This was the change of the official name of the country from British Honduras to Belize, which was the name of its capital city, in June 1973. Rather than use the old and new names where appropriate I have at the risk of historical anachronism discarded the old except in direct quotations and endnotes. Belize is therefore used throughout the study to refer to the country, and to complete the change the former capital will be referred to as Belize City.

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C. H. Grant

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Professor Lloyd Braithwaite, Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, suggested this study of Belize to me in 1966. At that time he was the Acting Director of the Institute of Social Economic Research in the University where I was a Research Fellow. He also nominated me for a Ford Foundation Fellowship in 1967 which made it possible for me to complete the study as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Edinburgh. The updating of the study was facilitated by a Canada Council grant in 1970 and was undertaken at the University of Waterloo, where my colleagues in the Department of Political Science provided much intellectual stimulation.

Many people in Belize have aided me in my work. My friend and colleague, Vernon Leslie, Resident Tutor of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University of the West Indies, placed his office at my disposal. Being a Belizean, he was an asset to my work in many other ways. Gilbert Rodwell Hulse, a former Anglican Archdeacon, was a mine of information and an engaging story-teller. Sir Harrison Courtenay, a lawyer and former Speaker of the House of Representatives, was never too busy to share with me the entire fifty-odd years of his political experience. His private collection of newspapers and rare official reports saved me many inconveniences. Without the co-operation of other political veterans such as the late E. O. B. Barrow, a retired District Commissioner, James Meighan, also a retired District Commissioner and People's United Party Senator, and Edgar Gegg, proprietor of the Vogue Commercial Store, I would have been unable to evoke the political climate of the 1930s. Miss Alice Gibson, the Deputy Librarian, Belize National Library and Archives, was also of invaluable assistance in making material available. The PUP government proved to be an admirably open administration. I was granted frequent and informal interviews with members of the political executive, including Premier George Price.

I should also like to thank Professor Harry Hanham, formerly head of the Department of Politics, University of Edinburgh, and now at the

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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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi *Acknowledgements*

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Professor D. A. G. Waddell, formerly a Senior Lecturer in History, University of Edinburgh, and now at the University of Stirling, and Professor W. J. M. Mackenzie, Department of Politics, University of Glasgow, for their interest in the work. With his encyclopedic knowledge the latter reminded me, in the process of raising several comparative questions, that Belize, though on the periphery of the colonial world, was just another colony. He also readily consented to write the foreword.

Several typists have been associated with the revision of this work and at the risk of being invidious I should like to thank Mrs Sandra Fauquier for undertaking the bulk of the typing.

Finally, I am deeply indebted to my wife, Lorene. She collaborated in data collection, typed and edited crude drafts and above all endured the deprivations which I inflicted during the period that the book was written.

Lusaka 1976

C.H.G.

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