RECENT WORK ON BRITISH HONDURAS

DAVID J. FOX

BRITISH HONDURAS is a small country, about the size of Wales or New Hampshire; its population is much the same as that of Cambridge, England, but substantially less than that of Cambridge, Massachusetts. It has been called in the past, perhaps with some justice, the Cinderella of the British Empire. But the rapid liquidation of that empire elsewhere has helped to focus sympathy and attention on the areas still left in colonial status. Colonial administrators in London can now devote more time to the affairs of British Honduras; historians and political scientists may be equally anxious to study the problems of a territory whose present political status endows it with a certain almost antiquarian interest.

Until recently little published work has been available to the geographer interested in British Honduras, but happily the situation has changed in the past few years. Now geographers are fortunate in the quality and quantity of the information that has become available, and many may well envy their colleagues (at least ten in the last three years) from British and American universities who have seen for themselves the prospects and problems of the country.

MAP COVERAGE

It is only since 1955 that British Honduras has possessed a virtually complete, medium-scale map coverage; only the keys (cays) and a few scattered highland tracts in the west remain unmapped on the scale of 1:50,000. Between 1946 and 1952 twenty-five black-and-white provisional sheets were published showing the coast and the northern lowland. Brown coloring was introduced on the seven first-edition sketch maps compiled after aerial photography of the Maya Plateau had made complete map coverage a possibility. Five more first-edition sheets have appeared since 1955, all for the northwest of the colony, and on these sheets blue has been added to the color range; no further replacement sheets are expected to be published in the immediate future. On all the maps, vegetation types and land divisions are indicated, and topography is shown by form lines or annotations or both. The sheets have their limitations. There is no indication of altitude; form lines are unidentified, and no spot heights are given, even for triangulation points. The vegetation cover is described in local terms that may be unfamiliar or misleading (for example, "ridge," as in "broken pine ridge," refers to a patch or strip of vegetation and does not necessarily bear a relationship to topography; "high ridge" is synonymous with "high forest"). Nevertheless, the maps make a unique contribution and must form the basis of any geographical description and analysis of the country. The intricate relief of the almost uninhabited and inaccessible Cockscamb and Maya Mountains was known only in a general way until these maps appeared.

1 "A Bibliography of Published Material on British Honduras As Found in the National Collection, The Central Library, Bliss Institute, Belize (British Honduran Library Service, Belize, 1960). 310 entries.
2 1: 50,000; D.C.S. (Misc.) 8, Directorate of Colonial Surveys, 1945-1955; D.O.S. 449 (Ser. E 757), Directorate of Overseas Surveys, 1955-.

Mr. Fox is assistant lecturer in geography at the University of Manchester, England.
Special maps have also become available. The most revealing are those which were compiled from information collected in 1952–1954 to illustrate the report of the British Honduras Land Use Survey. In technical quality these maps conform to the high standards we have learned to expect from the Directorate of Overseas Surveys. Particular mention should be made of three pairs of maps on the scale of 1:250,000 showing soils, natural vegetation, and potential land use respectively. The intelligent use of a wide range of colors and the detail of the field records have permitted the differentiation of 233 soil categories, 77 types of natural vegetation, and 34 potential land-use regions, shown in such a manner that visual generalization can be made to almost any level. For example, the broad contrasts between the lime-rich soils of the northern interior, the skeletal soils of the high Maya Plateau, and the leached soils of the coastal fringe are immediately apparent. The added detail, far from obscuring the generalization, heightens its value, for it presumes an awareness of the basis and degree of the generalization. The maps carry keys that are sufficiently detailed for most purposes, and complete keys are included in the report.

Maps accompany Dixon’s monograph on the geology of the southern half of British Honduras, and Flores’ account of the northern half includes a sketch map. The Phillips Petroleum Company abandoned drilling for oil in the Punta Gorda area in 1960 and may make their bore records available to supplement Dixon’s work. A map of soil-forming parent materials has been drawn as part of an introduction to a description of the soils of the country, this lithological map has yet to be applied to a full study of the geomorphology, though its relevance is obvious.

**Geomorphology and Climatology**

The Pleistocene history of British Honduras has apparently been one of intermittent, probably eustatic, changes of sea level, which caused alternating periods of alluviation and marine planation of the coastal areas. A tentative sequence of falls in sea level from 180 feet to its present level, with stillstands at 100 feet and 50 feet, has been described, and the associated developments in the river pattern deduced, but the geomorphology of the interior of the country remains little known. However, the remarkable barrier reef and offshore coral keys have recently attracted a number of investigators. Vermeer pioneered the work in 1957; he has presented arguments relating the situation of the reefs to block faulting, and the varied composition of individual keys to the persistence of the onshore trade winds. Work by Stoddart reported at a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society early in 1961 largely confirms Vermeer’s conclusions and is being continued. Thorpe’s

2. C. G. Dixon: Geology of Southern British Honduras, With Notes on Adjacent Areas (Belize, 1956).
4. "Land in British Honduras" [see footnote 3 above], Fig. VII (facing p. 25).
detailed map presented at the same meeting, showing the coral species that contributed to one of the larger keys, both above and below water, should provide useful material for the geographer interested in the general problems of coral-reef formation.

Climatic data for the colony are available now on a more generous scale than previously. There are virtually no long-term climatic records, and the full fruit of the recently increased number of weather-recording stations (44) will take a long time to ripen. However, the controlled evaluation of recent short-term records has produced more accurate maps of the distribution of climatic elements than existed before 1958.10 British Honduras has also enjoyed fringe benefits from the study of the dynamic climatology of Middle America, and in particular from recent studies of the upper atmosphere and hurricanes in the Caribbean.11

History

Sir John Burdon's abstract of the archives of British Honduras12 remains the most important source on the colorful history of the colony and is so acknowledged by later writers. Caiger13 has supplemented this material by discussing British Honduras in its Caribbean context; Waddell14 brings the picture up to date, and his book includes a useful annotated bibliography. The colony is the only British survivor of the Central American and Mexican beachheads established along the Caribbean and Gulf of Campeche shores by the early buccaneers-cum-foresters. It remains oriented toward the sea and toward the trade routes leading to the sea, and Belize remains the capital and chief port in spite of the problems attendant on a mangrove site.15 Before the Europeans arrived, the coastlands were sparsely settled, and the Mayan farmers, like the farmers of today, found the limestone soils and the river terraces of the interior more attractive. The use of air photographs, the field work of the British Honduras Survey Department, the researches of the government archeologist, A. H. Anderson,16 and of various academic workers during the last ten years, have established for the first time a comprehensive picture of the Mayan Empire settlement in the colony. It is a country of many monumental sites, and it has recently attracted a number of young British and American archeologists.

Land Use

However, the most useful publication on British Honduras to appear in recent times, the report on "Land in British Honduras" cited above, is concerned with the contemporary scene and with the agricultural potential. It contains the only detailed description of the entire country so far available. A valuable introduction, which includes a chapter on the history of land use, is followed by a regional account, in which the peculiar characteristics

10 "Land in British Honduras" [see footnote 3 above], pp. 15-22 and Figs. II-IV.
15 [Since this paper was prepared, the British Honduras government has announced that as a result of the recent hurricane disaster Belize will be rebuilt on a new site 44 miles inland.—Edtr. Note]
16 A Brief Sketch of British Honduras (7th ed.; Belize, 1958).
of each of twenty-five subregions are presented in detail, under such headings as climate, landscape, people, and land use (1952–1954). Suggestions are made of ways in which the economy of each subregion could be improved, both immediately and in the long run. The regional discussion is supplemented by a general discussion of factors likely to limit practical land-use improvements. Everywhere in the pages of the report the results of careful firsthand observation are apparent.

Population

A valuable source of information likely to become available soon is the report of the census of British Honduras taken on April 7, 1960. The household schedule required not only personal information but also details of the dwelling place and the nature of land tenancy. There are codes for ten racial types, and the clarifying instructions given to the enumerators remind one of the extraordinary racial variety that exists in the colony. Four languages are coded, though others are spoken, and many British Hondurans speak several. The instructions with respect to occupation include the sad comment “for all those who during the [past] year looked for work, but found none, describe former occupation”—unemployment and underemployment are chronic problems. The census schedule reveals another quality of life in British Honduras: there is a separate column for a subsidiary occupation and an adjoining one for the area of any plot or farm worked.

Preliminary figures from the census are already available. They show that British Honduras is no exception to the Central American rule of extremely high rates of natural population increase. The population of the colony rose at the rate of 3 per cent a year from 1946 (59,220) to 1960 (90,443). The rate of increase has been lowest in the southern part of the country (Toledo District), where infant mortality among the Kekchi Indians remains high; it has been highest in the two western districts (Cayo and Orange Walk), where rural immigration has been significant. The largest group of immigrants is represented by several settlements of Mennonites, who began to arrive in 1937 and who numbered 2,243 at the time of the census, with more expected. The Mennonites emigrated from northern Mexico (Chiutla) and settled in British Honduras only after receiving assurances from the government of substantial autonomy in local matters. The government hopes they will set an example to the local Maya of a balanced subsistence economy with an increasing farm surplus and so make the country less dependent on imported foodstuffs. Carey Jones has considered this dependence among other aspects of the colony’s economy.

Immigration

The promotion of immigration into British Honduras has been the keynote of the findings both of the Evans Commission and of the more recent Downie report. Downie argues that, in view of the declared constitutional objectives, British Honduras needs a population of at least 300,000 to provide an economic basis for the social, technical, and

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17 On application to the Department of Statistics, Kingston, Jamaica.
20 Jack Downie: An Economic Policy for British Honduras (Belize, 1950).
financial commitments that are obligatory for an independent country. On the other hand, elsewhere in the Caribbean the expanding economy of the West Indies Federation cannot absorb all the 90,000 annual increase in population, and many West Indians emigrate. The population densities in 1960 were 10.2 per square mile in British Honduras and 387.4 per square mile in The West Indies (with considerable variation, of course, from island to island). Despite the apparently complementary nature of these two areas, there is only a negligible movement from one to the other. The reasons behind this paradox are fairly clear. Possibly the most important is that although British Honduras wishes to attract peasant farmers, the migrating West Indian has no wish to be a pioneer agriculturist; the urban employment and other attractions, mythical or real, that the United Kingdom has to offer him outweigh in his view the higher cost of a passage across the Atlantic. In this respect he resembles the English-speaking Negro of British Honduras, who is a town dweller by preference (most live in or near Belize) and who has inherited the woodman’s scorn for the effeminate agriculturist. In other matters, however, the different histories of the two areas have made it impossible to equate the two peoples. Indeed, the Negroes of Stann Creek have no counterpart in The West Indies; for they speak a Carib language and have retained many of the cultural traits of the Indian peoples they absorbed. Fortunately, this interesting example of acculturation has been the subject of a recent monograph.\textsuperscript{24}

Despite the facts that the Downie report was greeted with little enthusiasm in British Honduras and that the most obvious source of immigrants has so far proved barren, a reading of the land-use report compels two conclusions. The first is that there is good agricultural land in the country suitable for colonization or for more intensive use; the second is that such colonization and use should be encouraged. Sir Hilary Blood, who visited British Honduras in 1959 to consider constitutional changes,\textsuperscript{22} supports these conclusions.\textsuperscript{23} Most commentators stress the need for planned development, since an intensified agriculture producing a commercial surplus demands—if it is to be successful—adequate marketing facilities, scientific assistance, and some capital investment, as well as land and labor. The reports place their faith in small holdings and the peasant farmer. They emphasize the contribution that beef and dairy cattle could make to the local economy in the southern district, in the northern sugar-cane country about Corozal, and in the eastern hill country south of Belize. For the west and northwest long-term forest management is advocated to provide profitable and congenial work for the Creoles and Negroes.

SOVEREIGNTY AND BOUNDARIES

The political status of British Honduras has proved of perennial interest and Professor Humphreys’ recent study\textsuperscript{24} is to be welcomed as a valuable discussion of the diplomatic background to contemporary controversies. Both Mexico and Guatemala claim to have inherited from Spain, after the collapse of the Spanish Empire, sovereign rights over British


Honduras territory. Mexico's claim is a latent one, to be pressed only if Guatemala's claim should ever appear likely to succeed; it relates to the former captaincy general of Yucatán, which reached as far south as latitude 17° 49' N. Guatemala claims the whole of British Honduras (and a number of Central American maps show the colony as the province of Belice in Guatemala), despite the fact that the captaincy general of Guatemala included only the southern part of the country. Both claims ignore the fact that the United Kingdom has been in possession of the territory since well before the disintegration of the Spanish Empire.

The present boundary between British Honduras and Guatemala was established in 1859 by a treaty ratified by Britain and Guatemala. One article in the treaty was an agreement "conjointly to use their best efforts, by taking adequate means for establishing the easiest communication... between... the Atlantic coast... and the capital of Guatemala..."; this proved impracticable, and by joint agreement the treaty was modified in 1861. Guatemala now asserts that nonimplementation of this article invalidates the whole treaty. The views of the British government are set out in a publication of the Central Office of Information in London. Recent unofficial views of the situation include a summary of, and commentary on, the controversy by W. J. Bianchi and several articles in the periodical literature.

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23 José Luis Mendoza: Inglaterra y sus pactos sobre Belice (Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores, Guatemala, 1942).
24 "British Honduras" (London, 1958), Appendix 1.