

The 1995 Carl O. Sauer Distinguished Scholar Award

W. George Lovell



When asked to summarize the geographic pieces in George Lovell's life the notion of epiphany came to mind. Certainly his first trip to Guatemala 22 years ago was an epiphany--a commonplace but poignant experience that offered insight and direction for a lifetime. It seems that George was chosen by Guatemala as much as he chose Guatemala.

As is often the case, his arrival there was somewhat accidental. After a year of graduate school in the prairies of Alberta, he was counseled by his advisor, Jack Bergmann, to kick about Central America after finishing field work in Mexico. With a small stipend and a Scottish knack for frugality, he hitched rides and rode second-class buses, finally reaching Guatemala on June 25th, 1974. That was it. "Within days" writes Lovell, "Guatemala had cast its spell and seduced me completely, offering not just a fleeting summer's reward but fulfilling work for a lifetime." Lovell had found his place --a gripping landscape inhabited by a native people who had survived cycles of conquest.

Another epiphany for Lovell was an intellectual one --his exposure to the writings of Carl Sauer, especially his collection of essays *Land and Life*, which he read and reread like a holy book. The Sauer lineage was clear: Jack Bergmann had worked with Henry Bruman at UCLA, who had studied under Sauer at Berkeley. Lovell never met Sauer, yet surely they are kindred spirits. They both embraced the relatively neglected story of American conquest and indigenous survival. Like Sauer, Lovell felt that a true geographic rendering of a place must include its history, reconstructed through archival and field work. And certainly Sauer's insistence upon studying the everyday activities of different cultures as a means to honor local knowledge and diversity is a theme echoed throughout Lovell's writing. They are different people to be sure, writing for different times. Consequently Lovell's work is more political, often reading like a testimonial rather than a dispassionate academic treatment.

Tacking between the geographic past and present, between archives in Seville and Guatemala City and the rugged beauty of the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, Lovell's geographic imagination has yielded five books: *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala* (1985), *Conquista y Cambio Cultural* (1990), *Secret Judgments of God* (1992), *Demography and Empire* (1995) and a collection of contemporary essays, *A Beauty that Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala* (1995). In addition to his monographs, he has published over fifty articles in refereed journals or scholarly anthologies, many of them in Spanish. Earning a Master's degree at the University of Glasgow in 1973, and his Ph.D. from the University of Alberta in 1979, Lovell has taught at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario for the last ten years. Three years ago he was promoted to full professor. Still in his forties, Lovell is recognized as one of the foremost scholars on the demographic collapse and cultural resilience of the Mayan people.

His scholarship is first rate. In clear and precise language he gives the reader a compelling portrait of the beautiful tragedy that is Guatemala. Just below the surface of each of his works is a moral imperative--one

that honors human resilience and cultural survival. His words, like an angel's, move people. After having a seminar read *Conquest and Survival*, a young graduate student came to me and [end p. 109] wanted to know how he could become an historical geographer and do work like Lovell.

Guatemala's political turmoil has also followed George to Canada. He has testified about the condition of Maya peoples before the Canadian parliament. For many years, George provided a home to a teenager from the Cuchumatanes, who arrived in Kingston as a refugee through the sanctuary movement. And when Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú visited Canada, he was one of her interpreters. He has written numerous popular articles for the Kingston *Whig Standard Magazine* to inform Canadians about the bloody political realities of Guatemala. Sometimes I wonder if George ever really leaves Guatemala. Once when driving with him through the Green Mountains of Vermont he turned to me and said, "this could be the Cuchumatanes."

Twenty years in Canada has not softened his brogue -you only need to meet George once to know he is from Glasgow. George likes to tell the story of the time he went home for Christmas, at the beginning of a year-long sabbatical. His father cornered him in a local pub and inquired about his upcoming "holiday". The senior Lovell (a retired shopkeeper from Govan) was convinced that his son had "lost his job." Growing up in economically depressed Glasgow, there were two ways out, "the book or the ball." Instead of soccer George chose study, another turning point.

George sees himself as privileged to be a geographer. With this privilege comes a responsibility to the people and places that he loves. Through action and in words, Lovell fulfills these obligations. He challenges us to be better scholars, teachers, and participants in the places in which we choose to practice our craft. For the remarkable standard of scholarly accomplishment he has given us, the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers proudly recognizes W. George Lovell with its 1995 Carl O. Sauer Award.

Marie D. Price[end p. 110]