

## The 1997 Preston E. James Eminent Latin Americanist Career Award



It is with great pleasure that the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers honors **Clarissa Therise Kimber** for her eminent career as a Latin Americanist geographer. Clarissa Kimber was attracted to Berkeley at an early age and it was there where she came to know the best of geography studying with John Leighly, Carl Sauer, John Kesseli, and Jim Parsons. With mentors of such stature, it is not surprising that she chose the University of Wisconsin to continue graduate studies in geography with a concentration in plant geography. Working under Jonathan Sauer and Andrew Clark at Wisconsin, she obtained her Master of Science degree in 1962. Her doctoral degree followed in 1969 with a dissertation entitled *Recent Historical Plant Geography of Martinique*.

By then, her interest in the interactions between environment and flora in the Neotropical realm was well-established. In the Caribbean Islands and the borderlands, Professor Kimber honed her skills at recognizing human influences on the vegetation cover, unveiling the importance of plant domestication, tracing phases of landscape development, and establishing lines of ecological balance. Particularly based on her experiences in Martinique, she has been able to reflect on the effects of isolation upon natural environments, which has found its expression in her writings about island biogeography.

Very much in consonance with the stimuli she had received in Berkeley and Madison, when considering vegetation changes in island environments, she began to assign human groups a very prominent role in the establishment and specialization of crops and useful plants. This spirit is in evidence in her work, *A Folk Context for Plant Domestication*. In that micro-world of the Caribbean Islands, Professor Kimber discovered another subject that today has become almost her "trademark" the study of "dooryard gardens" as expressions of ethnic preferences, aesthetic values, and popular wisdom. Professor Kimber has concentrated her research activity not only on the recognition of biotic diversity and change, but, very aware of the acute social relevance of bio-ecological research, she has tackled the difficult questions of increasing food production to meet the demands of fast-growing populations on islands of limited potentials and in societies that are experiencing rapid urbanization.

In her position as a senior professor at Texas A&M University, we have come to know and respect Clarissa Kimber as an outstanding biogeographer with a regional specialization in Latin America. Professor Kimber was instrumental in starting and developing the Latin American Studies Program at Texas A&M in the early 1970s. Today, she is on the steering committee of the Bush School of Government and Public Service for the establishment of a Latin American focus in the political economy curriculum at Texas A&M.

We give this award not just to an outstanding scholar but also to a warm and wonderful person. I first met Professor Kimber, whom I know well as Clarissa, at the CLAG meetings in Merida some 10 years ago. I was thinking about going to Texas A&M for my Ph.D. and I wanted to get a sense of the university and of her. I wanted to see if she would be someone with whom I would like to work. We had a wonderful talk. I knew right then that I wanted to work with her. The next year, I went to Texas A&M to work under Clarissa and I

never regretted my decision. I am proud to say that I was, and in many ways still am, a student of Clarissa Kimber. She has always been motivating, insightful, and supportive. If you ask any of her students, they will certainly say the same things.

The students Clarissa has supervised are a varied sort. This is because Clarissa believes her role as a mentor is not simply to churn out students in her exact mold, but rather to encourage students to develop their own interests and concerns. I am so fortunate that Clarissa allowed me to pursue my interest in the historical-settlement geography of Belize, a subject seemingly outside of her field of expertise. However, I never felt I was receiving anything but the best advice from the most capable expert in the field. This is because Clarissa undertook to learn all she could of my dissertation subject and even took two trips to Belize, at her own expense, to work with me in the field. While there, she made numerous friends among the research community. Every time I visit Belize, my friends down there ask "Where is Clarissa?" "How is she doing?" I have to wonder how many people in various parts of the world have similar fond thoughts of Clarissa.

The trait I have always been most impressed with in Clarissa is her broad scope. As I have alluded to, her interest is not simply restricted to the plant geography of the Caribbean. Clarissa is comfortable with a wide variety of geographical themes and methods. The conversations that we, in CLAG, have all had with Clarissa over the years have touched on a variety of themes in almost every aspect of geography. It seems as if Clarissa always has something of profound value to contribute. As for her regional outlook, Clarissa has done great work outside of Latin America. In recent years, Clarissa has worked in the former Yugoslavia and has conducted Fulbright Research in Taiwan. However, Clarissa has always felt most at home in the humid tropical lowlands of the Americas.

Therefore, for her professional achievements, contributions to our discipline, support of CLAG, and scholarly example, the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers is proud to bestow the Preston E. James Eminent Latin Americanist Award of 1997 upon Professor Clarissa Kimber, the first woman to be so honored.

**Michael A. Camille**