
Bonham C. Richardson

The 1999 Carl O. Sauer Distinguished Scholarship Award



The Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers honors Bonham C. Richardson for his historical geography scholarship of the Caribbean with the 1999 Carl O. Sauer Distinguished Scholarship Award. The Caribbean has been the region of his intensive and innovative research since he first undertook study for his Master's thesis in Guyana in 1967, more than 30 years ago. A historical geographer by persuasion, Bonham Richardson pursued questions of relevance to contemporary Caribbean life, but an insatiable curiosity to understand better the rich historical traditions and practices that these island (and South American enclave) societies had spawned directed his research quests to historical and ecological issues surrounding human-land relations in the Caribbean region's small, and smallest, territories.

Bonham graduated with a major in geography from the University of Arizona in 1961, and then moved on to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. His 1968 Master's thesis

was entitled *Village Landscapes in a Plural Society: Two Coastal Communities of Guyana*, and he later completed his Ph.D. dissertation in 1970 after further field work in that newly independent South American-Caribbean society. His dissertation was entitled *The Rice Culture of Coastal Guyana: A Study of Location and Livelihood*, and it tested agricultural location theory at both macro- (national) and micro(village) scales using rice farming by the Guyanese Indian communities as the focus. Significantly, Bonham published his first set of scholarly articles drawn from these theses in interdisciplinary outlets such as *The Journal of Developing Areas* and *Inter-American Economic Affairs*, as well as in geography journals such as *The Professional Geographer* and the *Journal of Historical Geography*.

Following his field excursions in Guyana, Bonham moved on to conduct field work throughout the insular Caribbean, with research sojourns in Trinidad (1971), Grenada and Carriacou (1973), St. Kitts and Nevis (1976), and Barbados (1980 and 1981-82). He soon found that archival research would provide the basis for the answers he sought, but he also relied on personal observation, participant-observation and in-depth interviewing to illuminate his historical geographic "landscape recreations" further. Bonham Richardson always sought interdisciplinary answers to the questions he pursued: namely the interconnections between island environments and ecologies and Caribbean people's livelihoods. His work was situated at the intersection of history, social anthropology, cultural ecology and population geography, and he drew inspiration from the rich body of regional scholarship as well as from the [end p. 163] writings of renowned Caribbeanists such as David Lowenthal, Sidney Mintz, Richard Frucht, Franklin Knight, Woodville Marshall, among others. Now, thirty intellectually productive years on, he stands among this distinguished fraternity, and his research monographs and many articles are an exemplary testament to the interdisciplinary scope of his work. He has followed in the footsteps of David Lowenthal, as geography's most distinguished

Caribbeanist.

Bonham's first book, *Caribbean Migrants: Environment and Human Survival on St. Kitts and Nevis*, was published in 1983 and is a thorough and convincing depiction of Caribbean "migration as livelihood" in which Bonham weaves an essential story assessing the evolving and deteriorating ecological support system of the island plantocracies and linking it with the survival strategies of the poor islanders, especially migration "off the island." There is a passage in the penultimate chapter that bears noting for its insightfulness into Caribbean historiography (p. 170). It goes as follows:

Land connotes freedom and signifies at least partial protection against world economic oscillations. Despite its deterioration on both islands, the land is a crucial medium for survival. Individual access to the land, whether owned, rented from an estate owner, or allotted by a planter, has been vital to individual survival on St. Kitts and Nevis for decades. Working local land has been half of the survival strategy of the people. The other half has been the world outside, which the men and women of St. Kitts and Nevis have tapped for a century and a half.

This successful venture was soon followed by another "exemplar" monograph, this later book documenting the historiography of the island of Barbados as it experienced dramatic social changes brought about by migrant's remittances and contract labor savings. Bonham's 1985 book, *Panama Money in Barbados, 1900-1920*, chronicled the enormous changes this small island went through as "silver men" from the island went under contract to the Isthmus, helped dig the Panama Canal, then returned with their savings, became small holders, and became politically enfranchised. An intense year of archival research in Barbados, and subsequent visits to libraries and archives in Washington D.C., provided the in-depth information necessary to make a highly readable and informative account of this island's earliest social revolution. The result was a highly acclaimed monograph that historians as well as geographers found extremely rich in insights and theoretical depth.

More archival research followed, but this time Bonham pursued his questions (and his stories) in the Commonwealth Institute archives in London. His focus was the small islands of the Windward chain in addition to Barbados, and the time period of most interest was the late 1800s. There was a somewhat lengthy maturing of this research project, during which time he wrote an additional text book in 1992 entitled *The Caribbean in the Wider World, 1492-1992: A Regional Geography*, a profusion of scholarly articles, a Caribbean migration chapter for Franklin Knight's collection, and generally sharpened his ideas sharing them with historians, anthropologists, and geographers in academic communities of the Caribbean, Europe and North America.

Eventually, Bonham's third major monograph materialized in 1997, entitled *Economy and Environment in the Caribbean: Barbados and the Windwards in the Late 1800s*. In this in-depth treatise, Bonham Richardson contrasts the "lowland" island, coralline Barbados with "highland" volcanic islands such as St. Vincent, St. Lucia and Grenada, which provides the physiographic context in which differing plantation economies are contrasted. One overarching temporal context is the 1884 depression and the subsequent hardships that islanders felt, but lived through during that slump. The other contextual force given explicit attention is "nature," and the significant impacts of environmental extremes, natural disasters and catastrophes are woven into Bonham's explanation. Insightful insertions of the racial stereotyping and of the commonly held 'colonial' mindsets of British officialdom with their simplistic theorizing on human behavior, their allusions to the tropics' environmental determinations of Windward [end p. 164] islanders' slothful character, or high-density's effects on the Barbadian's aggressive attitude, are valuable reminders, as well as amusing (sic?) anecdotes of colonialism's historical blinders. Bonham Richardson cuts through the biases, while at the same time providing rich anecdotes, the personal reflections of officials, summaries of Crown Commission Reports, and his own inferential analysis and conclusions where necessary. The result is a richly textured account, by no

means traditionally organized, but nevertheless insightful and useful for Caribbean scholars.

While his research scholarship continued to garner respect and worthy accolades in reviews of his monographs both in geography and other social science journals, his professional journey in academia followed a less dramatic course. After a short (two-year) stint at California State University in San Bernadino, Bonham joined the Rutgers Department of Geography and was there for five years. In 1977 he made what was to be a lasting decision and moved to Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, now renamed Virginia Tech, where he is a Full Professor of Geography to this day.

Despite his distinguished career, Bonham Richardson shows no sign of slowing down. He is still fully engaged with his Caribbean research, and there will be more of his scholarship to look forward to, of that I am certain. It is fitting, therefore, that the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers recognizes Bonham Richardson's influence on Caribbean historical geography by this distinguished award.

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Dennis Conway

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