

CAG Award for Scholarly Distinction in Geography

Dr W George Lovell

George Lovell is a student of the impact of the Spanish on the indigenous peoples and cultures of Central America, particularly on the Maya of the Cuchumatán Highlands of Guatemala. Through this lens, he addresses the pervasive, underlying issue of colonialism, to which in one way or another most of the Western Hemisphere has long responded. Some of his work focuses on the demographic effects of introduced diseases, particularly smallpox, but more on the reshaped economies, societies, settlement, and human landscapes associated with the Spanish coming. He is author editor or co-editor of ten books, some fifty book chapters, and seventy journal articles, many in Spanish, which he writes fluently. Some of his work has been translated into French, Italian, or Catalan. His most important books have gone through several editions. He is read by academics in several disciplines, by literate and politically engaged publics, and by some of Latin America's most creative writers. "Lovell," wrote the esteemed Uruguayan novelist Eduardo Galeano, "didn't choose Guatemala – he was chosen by this land, in a magic way, to tell us about the shining voices that whisper in the heart of darkness."



The qualities that mark Lovell's scholarship may be summarized approximately as follows:

A long time line. Lovell's analyses range across almost five hundred years beginning with the Spanish conquest and continuing to the present. Such analytical continuity is difficult to sustain, but for Lovell it is entailed by what is probably his most basic research finding: that patterns of domination and dependency established early in the colonial period have endured for centuries, even to the present.

A balance between archival and field work. Early colonial Guatemala can only be approached archivally, and Lovell is an outstanding archival scholar: meticulous, assiduous, and attentive. Close to the present, his work quits the archive for the field and other modes of data collection. Above all in the field, he knows how to listen. Sometimes, archival and field work overlap, as when oral accounts of the thousands of Mayans who were 'disappeared' between the early 1960s and mid-1990s have been corroborated by the discovery of archival records thought to have been destroyed.

A deep moral commitment. Lovell knows what the Mayans have been through and his heart goes out to them. Part of him is with these people, with their settlements and landscapes, with many of them as friends. As he puts it in the title of one of his books, theirs for him is "a beauty that hurts." Compassion is often cheap and ignorant, but not so for Lovell. After years of research he knows Guatemala: his moral commitment to the Maya is inductively derived. He has earned the right to judge and speak.

A deft pen. Lovell writes exceedingly well, far better than all but a handful of academics. He has the sensitivities and talents of a good novelist, and it is no accident that he has been twice short-listed for literary awards.

When these qualities – knowledge acquired over the years by the thoroughness and variety of his investigations, moral commitment arising therefrom, and considerable literary power – are combined, the result is a body of remarkable scholarship. Lovell is a major Latin Americanist. His best work on colonial Mesoamerica is without peer and ranks with the very best that historical geographers have ever achieved.