Preface

The seventeenth century was characterized some time ago as "Latin America's forgotten century." Yet with the exception of a few pioneering works, which are suggestive rather than detailed in nature, few attempts have been made to fill this vacuum in our knowledge.[1] Textbooks still emphasize the things which human curiosity finds exciting—the events and heroes of the conquest, the culture clash of the sixteenth century, the new thinking of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, and the bloody struggles leading to independence. Oversimplifying somewhat, the general picture we are given of colonial Spanish America is that the area went through the epic of its discovery and conquest, lay dormantly watching Spain's struggle with decline—the so-called colonial siesta—and then, tiring of it all, and encouraged by the new ideas and trade coming from other parts of Europe, discarded the old mistress in a bloody war of independence. But the colonial Spanish society of the sixteenth century was very different from the one described in the eighteenth century. What happened in the Latin American colonies between the first conquests, the seizure of long-accumulated Indian wealth, the first silver booms, and the period of modern raw material supply? How did Latin America move from one stage to the other? What were these intermediate economic stages, and what effect did they have on the peoples living in Latin America?

This general set of circumstances and questions was what first aroused my interest in the Spanish American seventeenth century. I soon found that several works, particularly those of Borah, Chaunu, and Chevalier, had suggested some general tendencies for the period, research paths and conclusions which might be worth following or testing.[2] It became apparent that a valid approach might be to test their general propositions, and other concepts which interested me, against a detailed examination of one circumscribed area of Spanish America. Circumstances and general inter-

est allowed me to concentrate on the area known during the colonial period as the Audiencia of Guatemala. I therefore began to read as much seventeenth-century Central American printed material as I could find, and as much archival material as I could squeeze into one frantic summer.

The limitations of this naïve approach were soon apparent. It became obvious that seventeenth-century Central America was living in the aftermath of a series of interrelated disasters. To dismiss this problem quickly by stating that it was all the wake of a military conquest was too easy. After all, the main Central American conquests were over by 1545, and to suggest that the seventeenth century was still suffering principally from a military shock after half a century was not satisfactory. Besides, from taste and training I believed in the significance of gradual social processes and multicausal change rather than phenomenological history and cataclysmic events.

Some very serious questions about the seventeenth century in Central America began to dominate my research. For example, the embattled seventeenth-century elite entrepreneurs of the area spent a great deal of time and effort protecting stagnant industries, trying to revive them, or looking for alternatives to them. Why had these industries stagnated; and why, to look at the other side of the coin, had they been relatively prosperous at some time in the preceding century? Then again, Central America in the seventeenth century suffered from a chronic shortage of labor; yet the first conquistadors had found teeming populations. Where had the Indian workers gone, and why? What effect did the demographic collapse have on Indian society?

New and uniquely seventeenth-century tendencies began to appear. Spaniards and Creoles in the early seventeenth century became much more interested than before in occupying and owning large stretches of rural land. Given the late feudal background attributed to sixteenth-century Spaniards, and the consequent seignorial ambitions which many were supposed to have, why had this rush to the land not occurred earlier, or, for that matter, why did it not take place later? In short, I realized that to explain the seventeenth century I would have to study the sixteenth century, where many of these and other problems had their origins.

At the other end of the time span which originally interested me a similar series of difficulties began to emerge. In the last few years of the seventeenth century and the early years of the eighteenth, some slow but significant changes began to intrude on the picture

which I had put together of the middle years of the century. For some Spaniards and Creoles economic circumstances began to improve, and one or two previously stagnant export industries showed signs of new growth. What caused these slow changes, or, to be more deterministic for a moment, what had happened to Central Americans to revive some of their hopes? Obviously the period 1690–1720 would have to be studied and compared with the years preceding it. In short, to answer a whole series of questions about the seventeenth century it became necessary to study the sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries in Central America. There was no help for it but to return to the printed material and to the archives of Central America and Europe, especially the Archive of the Indies in Seville.

During the research process the original periodization by centuries was gradually abandoned as naïve and general. What seemed to me a typically "sixteenth century" society, with plentiful although rapidly declining Indian laboring populations, with successful and successive silver, slaving, and cacao export industries, with the encomienda rather than the hacienda, with busy mercantile Spanish cities—came to an end in the 1570s, a decade of serious epidemics in Central America; and by the 1580s the region had entered an unprecedented era of experimentation, governmental regulation, and innovation which lasted until the early 1630s. The decline of human and cattle populations and the growing difficulties in trading abroad were not yet seen as irreversible processes, and the introduction of new forms of farming and of a new and seemingly successful export crop, indigo, led entrepreneurs, agriculturalists, and officials to believe that new approaches could solve their problems.

By the late 1630s these adjustments had been tried, and most of them had failed. From this time until about 1680, Central America appears to me typically "seventeenth century." This half century was one of isolation, of economic stagnation and depression, of cities which were no longer primarily market places but rather administrative and conventual centers, of rural areas where a few Spaniards were beginning to build the first haciendas and to use sparse Indian labor in more modern ways. After 1680 until about 1720, we see the beginnings of a revival based on smuggling and other factors, and new pressures on the Indians.

The long-term process which has just been described, a time of relative prosperity, a depression, and then a recovery, is one which is familiar to historians of medieval and early modern Europe. I have therefore made comparative use of published material which

describes the situation in Europe after the first epidemics of the Black Death in 1348, and, to a lesser extent, similar material about seventeenth-century Europe and its much debated mid-century crisis.

This attempt to describe and explain Central America's first great economic, demographic, and social cycle lays no claims to completeness. I have all but ignored narrative and institutional history on the grounds that it is available in general texts or is being presently undertaken by competent historians elsewhere. I have also made some perhaps arbitrary judgments about which economic and social trends contribute most to an understanding of life in a preindustrial, agrarian, post-conquest, colonial society. As a result of these judgments on my part factors such as land and export crops receive detailed attention, whereas other worthwhile themes are hardly touched.

The choice of Central America, the area between Tehuantepec and Panama, for this case study is of course idiosyncratic; it was the first area in Latin America of which I gained any firsthand knowledge, so my choice is at once justifiable and indefensible. On the other hand, I now believe that Central America suggested itself for this study for several good reasons. Its colonial experience is relatively unknown compared to that of its great neighbors, which has brought the satisfaction of breaking fairly new ground. Also, in spite of their appallingly scattered nature, archival and primary published sources are abundant and reasonably well-ordered. A more significant reason is the area's own intrinsic importance as a representative region. Colonial Central America was far from being the insignificant divided area which it appears to be today. With Yucatan, it was the home of the Maya, one of the great pre-Columbian cultures. If one ignores the fact that it is divided today into one Mexican state (Chiapas), the disputed colony of British Honduras, and five independent republics, it becomes apparent that this isthmian area, then called the Audiencia of Guatemala, lying between the two oceans, close to Jamaica, Curaçao, Veracruz, Havana, and Portobelo, the center of pirate battles and coveted by other European powers, was a large, once fairly populous, and always strategically significant stretch of land. Although it was of far less importance than Mexico or Peru, its economy and society were not "skewed" by the mining wealth and governmental attention which those great centers received. It has been called "the richest of the poor, or the poorest of the rich relations," and this may be the best

summation of its demographic, cultural, economic, and political history as a Latin American colony.[3]

Work on this history was begun in 1962 and continued with one lengthy interruption until December 1970. There is at present much valuable work in progress on Central America, and no doubt the tenth and subsequent volumes of the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* will correct many of the weaknesses and errors herein; but research must stop somewhere and the end of 1970 was arbitrarily chosen.

Any scholar who attempts a project over an extended period becomes aware that he is to some extent merely the originator and coordinator of a large communal effort. Readers of this work will quickly see that it depends heavily for its theoretical foundations on a few well-known bodies of research. What Pierre Chaunu has called "l'école de Berkeley," the demographic studies in the *Ibero-Americana* series of such as Borah, Cook, and Simpson provided a methodology and a comparative basis for studying what happens in periods of drastic population decline. French economic historians such as Chaunu and Mauro, with demographers of the European Middle Ages and seventeenth century such as Carpentier, Le Roy Ladurie, and Baratier provided yet another comparative dimension. The large body of work on Mexican history by U.S. and Mexican scholars such as Gibson and Miranda, to name but two, gave me guidelines for following land and labor sequences in Central America. And finally, a few pioneer writers in Central America gave me information and suggestive ways of interpreting it. Particularly helpful were writers such as Chamberlain, West, Smith, Sherman, Rubio, Castro y Tosi, and Floyd. My debt to these scholars is obvious from the Notes.

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M. J. M.

Spanish Central America

"After a hundred years the kings are peasants."
"After two hundred years the peasants are kings."
Old Spanish proverbs

Ring a-ring a-Roses
A pocketful of posies
'Tishoo, 'tishoo
We all fall down!

Nursery rhyme from the time
of the Great Plague of London