

IN MEMORIAM: *Ralph Lee Woodward Jr.*, 1934–2022

Ralph Lee Woodward Jr., the preeminent anglophone historian of Central America of the last half-century and the leading voice of the small but prolific cohort of historians born in the 1930s whose teaching and scholarship incubated the boom in Central American historical studies of the 1980s and 90s, died on June 26, 2022 in his hometown of Fayette, Missouri. He was 87.

Trained as a graduate student at Tulane University, long the foremost academic center for research on Central America, Woodward joined its History faculty in 1970, eight years after he earned a PhD in history there. In 1999, he ended his 29-year tenure at Tulane to accept appointment as the Neville G. Penrose Professor of History at Texas Christian University, where he taught until 2003. He subsequently taught at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas, as the Joe and Teresa Long Endowed Chair in Social Sciences in the spring semester of 2007.

Woodward's principal mentors in Tulane's History graduate program, William J. Griffith (1908–2003) and Thomas L. Karnes (1914–2010), were themselves the most prominent members of the tiny first generation of US-based historians of Central America, a group that also included Mario Rodríguez (1922–2005), Franklin D. Parker (1918–1995), and Dana G. Munro (1893–1990). Their progeny was Woodward's generation, more numerous but still small enough to qualify as a coterie. Besides Woodward, they included Thomas P. Anderson (b. 1934), Wayne M. Clegern (1929–2015), Thomas M. Leonard (b. 1937), Murdo J. MacLeod (b. 1934), Richard Millett (b. 1938), William L. Sherman (1927–1998), Charles L. Stansifer (1930–2016), and Miles L. Wortman (b. 1944). All but one of them established themselves as scholars of Central America in the 1960s and 1970s.¹

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1. Anderson published his first work in 1981.

Woodward was born on December 2, 1934, in New London, Connecticut, to Beulah Suter Woodward and Ralph Lee Woodward, professor and assistant dean in Yale University's Divinity School. Ralph Jr. was 16 when his family moved to Fayette in 1950 after his father was appointed president of Central College, now Central Methodist University. A graduate of Fayette High School, Woodward attended Central College and graduated *cum laude* in 1955. As a Central College student, he attended a summer session at the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo in Morelia, Mexico, where, he told an interviewer years later, "I developed a great interest in and love for Latin America."² As a student in an era when military service for men was obligatory, Woodward postponed active duty by joining the Marine Corps Reserves while in college. Commissioned a second lieutenant on graduation, he saw duty in Japan and the Philippines, an experience that he later said helped him to "develop self-discipline and to order my life."³

Once his military service was over, Woodward enrolled in Tulane's History graduate program. He received his master's degree in 1959 and his PhD in 1962. His dissertation, "The Consulado de Comercio of Guatemala, 1793–1871," became the basis of his first monograph, *Class Privilege and Economic Development: The Consulado de Comercio of Guatemala, 1793–1871*, published in 1966.⁴ Woodward's dissertation research ignited his interest in Rafael Carrera, the central political figure of nineteenth-century Guatemala. His 1993 study of Carrera and his times was Woodward's masterwork. A massively documented, 630-page political history of the Republic of Guatemala during the convulsive half-century that followed the Kingdom of Guatemala's separation from Spain, *Rafael Carrera and the Emergence of the Republic of Guatemala, 1821–1871* radically revised the conventional view of Carrera as a reactionary warlord whose misbegotten appeal to the country's downtrodden deplorables had detained Guatemala's passage into the era of progress and prosperity envisioned by his liberal adversaries. Woodward concluded that Carrera

was neither conservative nor liberal. He represented a reaction against both, injecting a rural vision into Guatemalan events. In defending the rural masses from the economic exploitation of the creole elite, Carrera arrested the rapid destruction of indigenous culture that had already begun to occur by 1837. It also, of course, delayed Guatemala's entrance on a large scale into the North Atlantic economic system and the dependency that accompanied that under liberal rule after 1871. In contrast to Benito Juárez, who sought to represent

2. Aharon Arguedas Zamora, "Entrevista con Ralph Lee Woodward Jr.," *Revista de Historia* 75 (2017): 221.

3. Arguedas Zamora, "Entrevista," 220.

4. Ralph Woodward Jr., *Class Privilege and Economic Development: Consulado de Comercio of Guatemala, 1793–1871* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966).

the rural masses through application of liberal principles, Carrera allied with the conservatives. Instead of incorporating them into the European tradition, Carrera allowed them to preserve traditional values and their community life. In this sense, Carrera stood outside the traditional liberal and conservative political parties and represented a unique historical force rooted in indigenous custom and interests. In protecting Indian land and labor from creole and foreign exploitation for nearly thirty years, Carrera was responsible for preserving much of Guatemala's native culture and uniqueness. This contrasted sharply with what happened elsewhere in Latin America and would happen later in the century even in Guatemala.⁵

Woodward shared the assessment that the Carrera monograph was his most enduring and consequential addition to the historiography of Central America.⁶ Nonetheless, his most widely read and broadly influential contribution was a college textbook, *Central America: A Nation Divided*, the fifth in Oxford University Press's highly regarded Latin American Histories Series, edited by James R. Scobie. First published in 1976, the book quickly displaced the standbys produced by the first generation of Central Americanists. Parker's *The Central American Republics* and Rodríguez's *Central America* were both a decade old, and in a review of Woodward's survey, Parker himself wrote that the framework Woodward adopted of the region's post-independence history was "never previously set forth so clearly."⁷

Yoking together the pieces of a multinational political history of bewildering complexity, Woodward's survey offered the reader a powerful unifying thesis, brilliantly and simply conveyed in the book's subtitle ("A Nation Divided") and stated with great clarity in the first lines of the book's foreword:

The concept of a united isthmus of Central America dates at least from the beginning of Iberian rule there. In fact, the idea of a Central American nation might even be attributed to some pre-Columbian inhabitants and conquerors. Yet the reality of such a nation has repeatedly eluded the peoples of the isthmus. This work rests on the premise that national union potentially exists for the five Central American republics.⁸

5. *Rafael Carrera and the Emergence of the Republic of Guatemala, 1821–1871* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 469.

6. Arguedas Zamora, "Entrevista," 228.

7. Franklin D. Parker, review of Woodward, *Central America: A Nation Divided*, in *American Historical Review* 82:1 (February 1977): 226–227.

8. Ralph Lee Woodward, *Central America: A Nation Divided*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), ix. The wording remained unchanged through all three editions.

To this boldly enunciated and entirely plausible (though certainly contested) interpretation of the region's tumultuous history was joined Woodward's trademark loyalty to what he called "objectivity and accuracy," principles he considered more important than deference to any particular school of thought.⁹

Especially providential for the book's success was its precise coincidence in time with the sudden rise to global prominence of political violence in El Salvador and Guatemala but above all in Nicaragua, and the US government's unsettling response to the crisis. Teachers, students, and researchers now had at hand a comprehensive, evenhanded, and superbly written historical introduction to a region engulfed in a crisis that would intensify and widen in the 1980s before finally subsiding in the mid 1990s. More than any other strictly academic publication, Woodward's *Central America: A Nation Divided* contributed to the avalanche of published work and indirectly to public debate on Central America in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰

In August 2005, the results of another providential event, Hurricane Katrina, were far less salutary. The costliest natural disaster in US history destroyed Woodward's home in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, and all its contents. Among the losses were his carefully curated personal library of Central American publications and documents. But more damaging still was the destruction of the research notes he had accumulated over the decades, including those for a history of merchant guilds in the Hispanic world. Planned as a follow-up to his first monograph, the book was to draw heavily on research Woodward had conducted not only in Central America but also in Argentina and Chile in the 1960s, with the support of two Fulbright-Hays lectureships. Katrina, he said, prevented him from finishing the book on merchant guilds as well as further publications planned on Central America.¹¹

The influence of Woodward's scholarship extended well beyond his textbook and his few monographs. He published 43 articles in scholarly journals, 32 chapters in edited works, hundreds of encyclopedia articles (including 92 in the *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture* alone), more than 100 book reviews, several hundred abstracts of journal articles, and numerous bibliographies.

9. Arguedas Zamora, "Entrevista," 221. Woodward considered most of his work to have been "en el molde positivista" (229).

10. Walter LaFeber's highly influential bestseller *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983) was a tendentious and oversimplified, but breezily written, takedown of US policy in Central America that was written for a general audience.

11. Arguedas Zamora, "Entrevista," 228.

Asked in an interview published in 2017 to weigh his legacy in the historiography of Central America, Woodward replied that he thought his greatest contribution might be the students he mentored. Among Central Americans, he named Aarón Arguedas, Rodolfo Pastor Fasquelle, Oscar Peláez Almengor, Jorge Mario Salazar, Luis Guillermo Solís, Regina Wagner, Álvaro Taboada, and Enrique Gordillo. The most noteworthy among his US students for their contributions to Central American history, he said, were Richmond Brown, David Carey, Paul Dosal, Kenneth Finney, Michael Fry, Virginia Garrard, Timothy Hawkins, Heather Judge Abdelnur, Wade Kir [Kit], Sonya Lipsett, Rachel May, David McCreery, Blake Pattridge, Karen Racine, Peter Szok, J. T. Way, Stephen Webre, and Gene Yeager.¹²

Woodward's graduate students remember him as a demanding but encouraging teacher who inspired them with his mastery of the region's history and its historiography. J. T. Way, associate professor in the Department of History at Georgia State University, called Woodward "an amazing mentor and supporter of mine, and the reason why I am a historian." He was "both absolutely inspirational and unyieldingly tough," forcing students to focus first on the historiography. "We spent a huge amount of time mastering the literature. He was really big on knowing your way around the historiography, and it was an invaluable immersion. He was extremely exacting in writing; your work had to be well written and thoroughly researched, and with all the archives at Tulane, it was a great experience."

David J. McCreery, who taught at Georgia State from 1977 to 2011, was Woodward's first graduate student at Tulane. The publication of *Central America: A Nation Divided* in 1976, he recalled, "was just in time" to meet the wave of public interest in isthmian affairs. Deluged with speaking invitations, Woodward "loved to go anywhere and talk about Central America and his book," which McCreery believes extended knowledge of the region to a wide range of students and probably inspired careers in Central American history.

Virginia Garrard, professor of history at the University of Texas in Austin, received her PhD at Tulane in 1986. Writing her dissertation under Woodward's direction, she found that "you really had to hit your marks for him." Woodward, who was most comfortable with social and political history, told her that his personal rule was that "I never let anyone write about religion," but he made an exception for me." A noted gourmet, he often invited his students to lunch. Garrard recalled a familial closeness that his students shared with Woodward and his family: "To us, he was

12. Arguedas Zamora, "Entrevista," 229.

almost a father figure.” She would rank Woodward first in the historiography of Central America, noting that “*Central America: A Nation Divided* was incredibly influential in a way that a history book usually isn’t because it was so scrupulous, so meticulously researched,” just as his monographs were.

After a memorial service on July 10, 2022 at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Fayette, Ralph Lee Woodward Jr. was buried with military honors at the Fayette City Cemetery alongside his parents and his wife Janice Chatelain, who died in 2008.¹³ He is survived by three children (Mark Woodward, New Orleans; Laura Woodward, Guadalajara, Mexico; and Matthew Woodward, Shelton, Washington). His first wife, Sue Dawn McGrady, died in 1996. After the death of Janice, he married Delores Bland, with whom he attended Fayette High School, who survives him.

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13. *Woodward Memorial Service*, a video recording of the memorial service is at <https://youtu.be/a2BF4cZ5b9M>, and *Woodward Graveside Service*, a recording of the burial service, is at <https://youtu.be/gPx-hKif8wU> (both accessed July 21, 2023).