

Library Ambassador

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

BRIAN COUTTS HAS RESEARCH INTERESTS THAT ARE AS VARIED AS THE BOOKS ON THE SHELVES OF HIS LIBRARY. COUTTS, HEAD OF WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY'S DEPARTMENT OF LIBRARY PUBLIC SERVICES, IS A LATIN AMERICAN SPECIALIST, HAS EXTENSIVELY RESEARCHED THE COUNTRY OF BELIZE, AND IS A NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED EXPERT ON REFERENCE PUBLISHING. EACH YEAR HE SELECTS THE "BEST REFERENCE SOURCES OF THE YEAR" FOR LIBRARY JOURNAL, THE NATION'S LEADING LIBRARY TRADE JOURNAL.

Sitting in his comfortably cluttered office, he pushes his glasses up on his nose and peruses the piles of reference materials to which he has contributed in his 15 years at Western Kentucky University. Coutts, a native of Canada, received his BA (history) and MA (Central American history) at the University of Calgary. He later received his master's of library science and his Ph.D. (History) from Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, where he completed his doctoral dissertation on the Spanish administration of Louisiana. During this time, he lived in Seville, Spain, for a year.

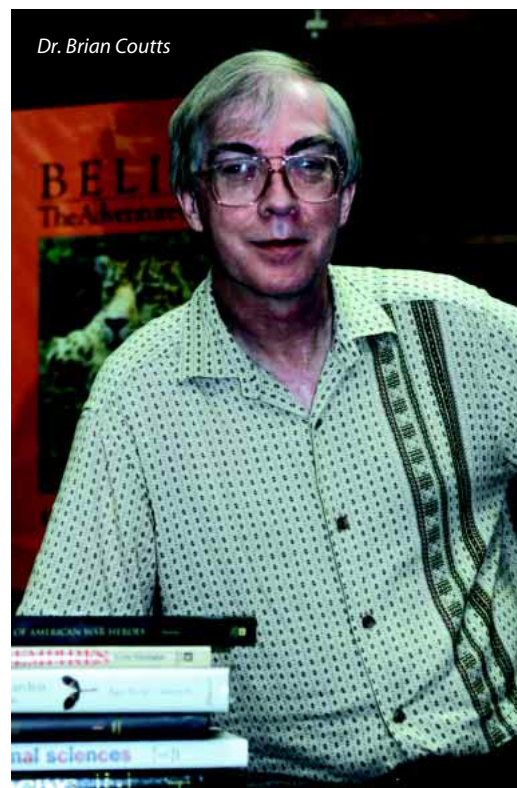
"I was a Canadian Latin Ameri-

can specialist with an American twist," he laughed. "I studied former Spanish possessions in the Southeastern United States, and was one of the first researchers to look at this area." Coutts put this expertise to use writing 32 entries for *A Dictionary of Louisiana Biography* (1988), articles on three

governors for *The Louisiana Governors: From Iberville to Edwards* (1990), and numerous articles for the *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture* (1996).

His Latin American expertise led him to develop a research interest in the small Central American country of Belize. While Coutts was still in school at the University of Calgary in 1968, he had an opportunity to travel to Belize, which was then still a British colony. "While attending summer school my first assignment was to set up field work opportunities for other students," he said.

Thus began his pursuit of knowledge and expertise about the country of Belize, something he is still deeply involved with today. "I came to Western in 1987," he said. "At that time, Peggy Wright (former WKU coordinator of research instruction) was



Dr. Brian Coutts

PHOTO BY LADONNA HARMON

working in our department, and she was also interested in Belize. Belize had achieved full independence as a parliamentary democracy in 1981, and Peggy was instrumental in establishing the first university library in Belize. Materials were ordered at Western and delivered to Belize."

Coutts and Wright collaborated on the publication of *Belize*, in 1993, the 21st volume of the *World Bibliographical Series*. This detailed volume, which outlines the history of the country, was three years in the making. Volumes in the *World Bibliographical Series* cover a wide range of topics from archaeology to tourism. Coutts and Wright are currently working on a new project together, the *Historical Dictionary of Belize*, which will be published next year.

"The country is desperate for more reference sources about its own people," Coutts said. "We are writing this historical dictionary with the chief archivist in Belize. Our goal is to select the data and narrow it down so that it is helpful to students. There are few published references sources about the country, so we have had to gather some of the information through personal interviews."

Coutts last visited Belize five years ago to write articles on its prime ministers. During this trip, he had the rare opportunity to meet personally with then Prime Minister George Price to discuss his experiences and views. "There were two political parties in Belize," Coutts explained. "You were either in power and controlled everything or you were totally out of power. The prime minister came to the Supreme Court building in Belize City every Wednesday when the government was not in session in Belmopan, the capitol. Anyone who wished could line up to try to speak to him. So one Wednesday, I lined up with the rest. I spoke to him, passed on my letters of reference, and requested an interview. Three days later, a courier arrived and summoned me to the capitol." The experience Coutts had in

Brian Coutts in Belize



Belize City harbor

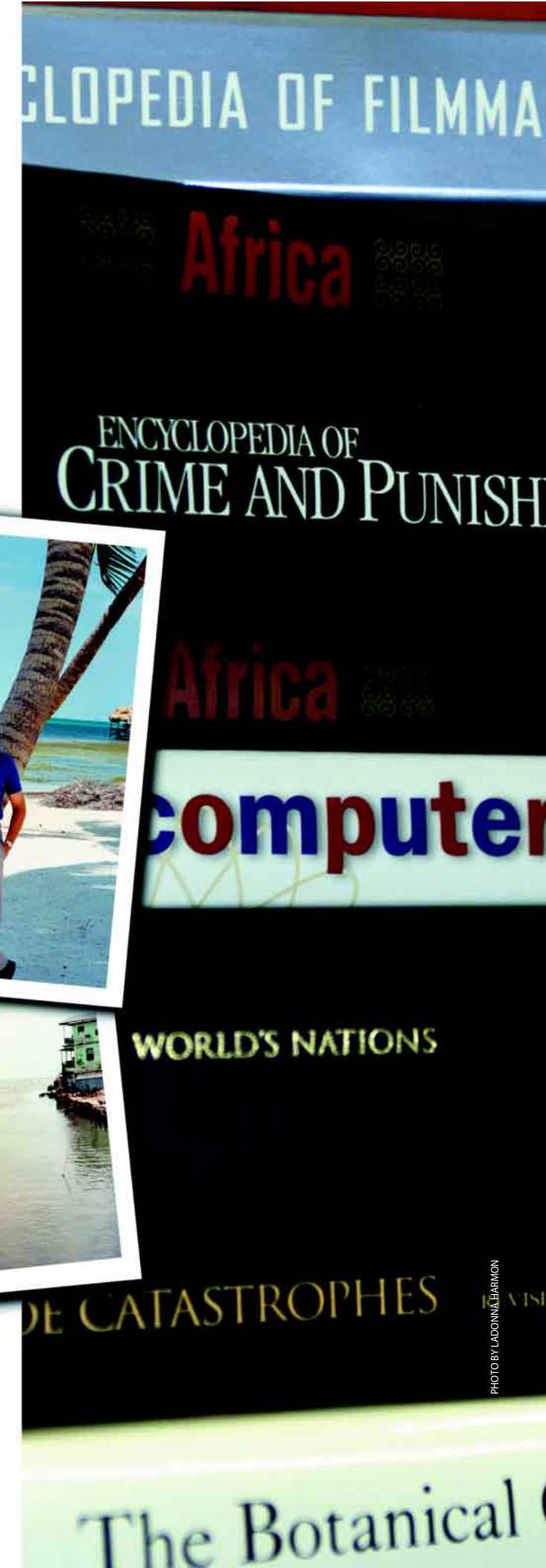


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meeting with Price gave him a unique perspective as he completed this project.

“Because of Western’s strong interest in Belize, we are interested in assisting the country in expanding academic opportunities for students,” Coutts said. In 1988, Western and Murray State University founded the Consortium for Belize Educational Cooperation (COBEC) to organize their efforts in faculty and student exchange programs. Since then, COBEC has grown to include 12 American universities and all of the secondary institutions in Belize. The directors of the National Library and the University of Belize Libraries both trained at WKU.

Coutts’ interests and expertise are varied. He is a prolific book reviewer, having reviewed more than 300 publications. In 1987 the editor of *Library Journal* approached him about compiling a special feature article on the “Best Reference Books of the Year.” He has been writing that

feature since 1988, and it is consistently the best selling issue of the magazine. He chooses publications that are most useful to medium sized public or academic libraries, and for the past several years has also chosen the 15 best Web sites for reference librarians.

The addition of reference web sites has changed the way libraries are wired for the new millennium, he said. “Some portions of the library have dramatically changed,” he noted. “The strongest area of change has been in the use of traditional print indexes. For many years research techniques were relatively similar. You checked in print indexes and looked in the backs of books to review the bibliographies.”

Coutts said this all began to change around 1980 with the invention of ROM (read only memory) microfiche readers — and even more dramatically after 1993 with the invention of Web browsers.

“Now, few print indexes are produced,” he said. “What used to require months of research can now be done in an afternoon. This has not lessened the need for experienced researchers and librarians, though,” he laughed. “A researcher must now learn to harness the Web and give it some structure. We now have information overload, and the task is not any easier.”

