

Freedom fighters as scum

With the Contras:
A Reporter in the Wilds
of Nicaragua
by Christopher Dickey
General, \$28.95

Reviewed by W. GEORGE LOVELL

OVER THE PAST few years, events in Central America have unfolded in such a way as to give the region political topicality unimaginable a decade or so ago. Of all the "banana republics" thrust from the sleepy obscurity of O. Henry to the paranoid concerns of Ronald Reagan, none has engaged media attention quite so consistently as Nicaragua. Neither protracted civil strife in El Salvador nor lethal counterinsurgency in Guatemala seem to generate the newsworthiness of any number of issues involving Nicaragua. If, as Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes asserts, an underdeveloped country is one whose story foreign correspondents have yet to discover, Nicaragua (at least in this sense) cannot be considered part of the Third World.

Top billing dates back to July 1979, when the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional overthrew the repugnant dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Prominence has been assured since then (occasional shifts of focus notwithstanding) by U.S. efforts to have a "secret war" waged on its behalf by anti-Sandinista forces. Their aim is to restore in Nicaragua a government more mindful of, and subservient to, American interests, values and ways of thinking. Christopher Dickey's *With the Contras* reconstructs the origins and development of a sordid plot about as secret from its inception as President Reagan's love of jelly beans.

Dickey recounts a tale by now familiar and worn, but he brings to it several elements that lend his narrative a certain distinction. Arrogance and the inability to listen to sound advice, Dickey points out, afflicted the Sandinistas from the outset. He reminds us, importantly, of how the seasoned words of none other than Fidel Castro fell on deaf ears:

Since before the days of the revolution when Fidel helped pull together the Sandinistas' three factions, he had counselled the Ortegas and Borge and Wheelock to be careful with the United States, not to make the mistakes he had made in provoking Washington. The money of the United States was good money and if you were smart . . . you could get it to underwrite the rebuilding of the country.

By not taking seriously Castro's deliberations on the virtues of *realpolitik*, the Sandinistas have undermined their own revolution, from within, almost as much as armed aggression has from without. The abysmal record of Sandinista dealings with the Miskito people of the Caribbean edge is perhaps the best illustration of the unfortunate tendency to believe that what one does in the name of revolution is acceptable, correct, progressive and sensible. Sustained resistance from the Miskito coast and growing opposition elsewhere, to say nothing about the more detached

position of Havana, suggest otherwise.

The most original feature of Dickey's contribution lies in the lived experience behind the book's unsettling title. Along with James Le Moyné, then of *Newsweek*, now with *The New York Times*, Dickey (*Washington Post* bureau chief between 1980 and 1983 for Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean) spent time early in 1983 travelling with "contra" forces operating inside Nicaragua, the first such reporters to do so. Anyone even remotely inclined to accept Mr. Reagan's scurrilous designation of the contras as "freedom fighters" who are "the moral equivalent of the founding fathers and the brave men and women of the French Resistance" should read this book for an alternate view.

Dickey portrays these reprobate killers (of each other as well as innocent Nicaraguan peasants) as the mercenary scum they are. That the U.S. government, allegedly the guardian of political democracy and human dignity everywhere, last month not only sought to continue but to increase funding for the violations Dickey reports is currently but one American travesty among many.

While Dickey succeeds in getting out an important inside story, there are considerable failings in relating that story to a more developed context. In this respect, Dickey exhibits a trait all too common among journalists sent to cover the Central American beat. For most of them, history in Nicaragua begins with the fall of Somoza in 1979, just as history in Guatemala begins with the rise and demise of Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in the early 1950s. The cultural antecedents of revolt are much more deeply rooted, as are the answers that might explain why revolutions in Central America either fail or run out of steam. Not until journalists, and the people who employ them, rise to the challenge of placing "the news" in historical context will their accounts be spared built-in obsolescence.

Let this remark be interpreted as naive and pompous commentary from the confines of the ivory tower, note that some foreign correspondents publish work with a scholarly depth and enduring worth that any serious academic would envy. Among others in this category are Alan Riding of *The New York Times*, James Nelson Goodsell of the *Christian Science Monitor*, and Marcel Niedergang of *Le Monde*. Their books possess critical insight and a predilection towards historical reflection. Furthermore, Messrs. Riding, Goodsell and Niedergang write engaging and creative prose, not (as does Dickey) in crude, primitive, staccato bursts. Such a style may arguably work in a newspaper article, but it is a frustrating and inappropriate technique for longer and, it is hoped, more penetrating discourse. More than most, journalists surely understand that how something is expressed matters just as much as what is expressed. Has Marshall McLuhan been dead that long? □

W. George Lovell, who has travelled and studied throughout Central America over the past 12 years, teaches in the Department of Geography at Queen's University.



Contras in Nicaragua: Reprobate killers

Scuttled by squabbling

"And I Was There"
by Edwin Layton, with Roger Pineau
and John Costello
Macmillan, \$29.95

Reviewed by MIKE DEWING

THERE'S A THEORY which says that wars can begin through bureaucratic inertia. The First World War is usually cited, because once mobilization orders were given, the rigid train timetables could not be changed, and millions of men chugged to their doom.

"And I Was There" is about the converse: how bureaucratic inertia and wrangling prevented preparations for war from getting off the ground. Rear Admiral Edwin Layton was the fleet intelligence officer at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked in December 1941. He was to retain the post throughout the war.

What is documented here for the first time is how fierce intra- and inter-service rivalries stood in the way of adequate warnings. The story of the American success in breaking Japan's codes has been told before. That the Japanese diplomatic code known as "Purple" was being read in Washington, and that its last-minute warning arrived in Hawaii along with the first bombs is the stuff of movies. That Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet was shot down while flying over a remote island because the Americans had read his itinerary has been public knowledge for a long time.

Layton's story, though, is about what went wrong. Deciphered secret mes-

sages must be evaluated and disseminated, but to whom? This book rebuts those who maintain that the commanders at Pearl Harbor — Rear Admiral Husband Kimmel and Lieutenant Walter Short — hadn't heeded warnings of impending hostilities.

Rather, as shown by Layton's detailed day-by-day account, based in part on recently declassified documents, "the real cause of the tragedy was the internal feuding in the navy department that limited Washington's ability to evaluate and disseminate intelligence." Extraordinarily, the feuding continued well into 1942, and the same mistakes were barely averted.

Kimmel and Short were made the scapegoats, and the charges against them have recently been reasserted in Gordon Prange's *At Dawn We Slept*. Layton sets a different scene: Japan had become increasingly aggressive during the 1930s, and an American trade freeze and oil embargo after Japan's invasion of Indochina in July 1941, was designed as a reprimand. An ill-considered move, it forced Japan into seeking its own oil supplies in the Dutch East Indies.

The situation became more and more tense, and it soon became obvious that the Japanese would make a move. Yet increased centralization and the jealous guarding of bureaucratic territory in Washington prevented important diplomatic intelligence from being relayed. Washington's warnings pointed to an attack on Russia, or, more likely, a move in the Philippines area.

Layton demonstrates, with extensive documentation, that the administration knew war to be imminent. It had abruptly hardened its negotiating position on November 26. This was in response, Layton says, to secret information from some source other than the codes. He speculates that a clue to Japanese intentions might have come from the British or even the Soviets. President Franklin Roosevelt, however, faced a strong non-interventionist lobby, and had to let the Japanese fire the first shot. Still, contrary to revisionist theories, Layton had no hint that Pearl Harbor was the target.

Layton does say that there were messages, some decoded, some only read shortly after the fact, which would have warned Pearl Harbor — had they read them. What is more astonishing is that Washington didn't learn from its mistakes.

The unit at Pearl Harbor, however, did. It set to analyzing Japan's operational codes — something it wasn't allowed to do previously. As a result of some inspired detective work by a man who became a legend in the field, Commander Joe Rochefort, the Americans were able to win the battle of Midway in June, 1942. Part of Rochefort's task had been to prove Washington's analysis of Japanese intentions wrong. Had he not done so, the battle would not have been fought, or the trap the Japanese had been preparing might have worked.

Layton has accomplished what he set out to do: to salvage the reputations of some close friends and colleagues. At 80 years of age, he wanted to tell the story before it was too late. The book was well on its way to completion when in April, 1984, Admiral Layton suffered a fatal stroke. □

Mike Dewing is a Kingston freelance journalist.