

Reviewed by W. GEORGE LOVELL

THE PEOPLE OF Latin America are no strangers to bloodshed and suffering, and never have been. From colonial times until the present, their lands have been dominated by strong-willed and autocratic men who viewed, and continue to view, terror and violence as instruments necessary for the maintenance of power, as simply "distasteful" means to "desired" ends. Self-preservation justifies all. Seldom have enlightened exercises in democracy amounted to much in a continent far less accustomed to hope than to despair, from the attempts of humanist Vasco de Quiroga to create an ideal society in 16th-century Mexico to the short-lived Chilean dream of Salvador Allende in the early 1970s.

Confrontation rather than compromise, repression rather than release, have long been characteristic of the Latin American tradition. Greed among a few perpetuates misery and deprivation among the many. Change here moves slowly and must be measured in centuries. Peaceful solutions are apparently naive and unrealistic, ultimately serving only to prolong the agony. Even by Latin American standards, the historical experience of Nicaragua warrants consideration as an extreme and special case of a more general malaise because of the prominent role in the tragedy of one single family, the Somozas. It is to the unravelling of their rise and fall, and what this meant for the Nicaraguan people, that Bernard Diederich's book is directed.

Diederich, a seasoned journalist who has covered Central American affairs for *Time* magazine for the past 15 years, approaches his subject in a narrative and descriptive way. He begins his grisly tale, appropriately, by setting the cultural-historical context of early 19th-century Nicaragua. Following independence from Spain in 1821, the failure of the liberal-inspired Union of Central America led to the emergence of the various constituent parts, around mid-century, as self-governing nations, which have survived, albeit shakily, into the present day as the republics of Guatemala, Hon-

Rise and fall of Tacho II

duras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

The political autonomy of Nicaragua, more than any of its neighbors, has been threatened constantly by the looming presence of the United States. First attracted to Nicaragua by its trans-isthmian potential (goods and passengers crossed the country by water, road and rail during the Gold Rush to California in 1849), the United States considered it necessary to intervene militarily on numerous occasions between 1909 and 1933, Marines being landed in order to safeguard American interests, lives and properties.

When they withdrew their armed presence in 1933, the Americans left behind two lethal legacies: the National Guard they formed and trained and the man who was later known as "the last Marine," Anastasio Somoza Garcia (Tacho I), the founder of the Somoza dynasty and the heavy-handed ruler of Nicaragua until his assassination in 1956. The clout of Tacho I, who ordered and shrewdly conducted the murder of the peasant leader and later revolutionary hero Augusto César Sandino in 1934, is perhaps best summarized by the words of calypso king Rupert "Kontiki" Allen:

A guy asked de dictator if 'e 'ad any farms

An 'e said 'e 'ad only one — Nicaragua.

After the assassination of Tacho I, power passed smoothly on to his two sons: Luis, who assumed the presidency of Nicaragua in 1957, and Anastasio Jr., who effectively ran the country singlehandedly, in conjunction with the National Guard he headed, after his brother died of a heart attack in 1967.

Most of the book deals with Anastasio Jr. (Tacho II or "Tachito"). He is the Somoza of the title, and Diederich gives a detailed account of his life and times, painstakingly documenting the avarice and brutality of his reign, from his "election" on Feb. 5, 1967, to his ouster in July 1979 by opposition forces led by Sandinista guerrillas and his eventual assassination, under mysterious circumstances, while in exile in Paraguay on Sept. 17, 1980. Upon fleeing Nicaragua, Somoza left behind a country in ruins, one racked by a civil war that claimed some 30-40,000 lives and from which he departed with a personal fortune estimated at close



Anastasio Somoza

to \$500 million. The treasury, on the other hand, reported a staggering foreign debt of \$1.5 billion and reserves amounting to little more than \$3 million.

Somoza's overthrow, Diederich claims, can be critically linked to three profound incidents. First, the earthquake which devastated Managua and west-central Nicaragua on Dec. 23, 1972: By pocketing the vast majority of the funds which poured into the country earmarked for the relief of earthquake victims and a program of national reconstruction, Somoza lost completely what little credibility he had enjoyed among the common people and his former middle-class supporters.

Second, the murder by Somoza sympathizers on Jan. 10, 1978, of the newspaper editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, a popular critic of Somoza and his watchdog National Guard: This act served to unify many hitherto disparate, and conser-

vative, anti-Somoza forces and placed them firmly on the side of the revolutionary Sandinistas.

And third, the callous slaying, recorded by a television crew and later viewed by millions around the world, of the American newsman Bill Stewart on June 20, 1979: The sight of one of its citizens being ordered to lie prostrate on the ground by a National Guardsman who seconds later shot him behind the right ear proved too much even for Somoza's staunchest American backers. Henceforth, his days were numbered and victory by the Sandinistas inevitable.

As a comprehensive eyewitness account, as a journalist's view of the bloody strife that took place in Nicaragua in 1978 and 1979, Diederich's book makes for easy and rewarding if somewhat depressing reading. His prose is often rather blunt and without innovation but is refreshingly free of much of the slick, sugary and sensational "Times" of his fellow correspondents. Although description far outweighs analysis, nonetheless there is an occasional attempt at interpretation, a striving to give shape, coherence and meaning to a seemingly endless and anarchic sweep of events.

Diederich writes: "Washington failed to understand that the political unrest stemmed overwhelmingly from internal conditions and could not successfully have been provoked from abroad. This [is] a worrisome failure of long-term United States policy toward a reign convulsed [from within] by social and economic pressures."

If only Mr. Reagan, Mr. Haig and Ms. Kirkpatrick (U.S. ambassador to the United Nations) could comprehend the sanity and veracity of such an assessment — coming, as it does, not from a raging Marxist but from a spokesman for mainstream America — then perhaps their view of the carnage in El Salvador and in Guatemala would change. Alas, the U.S. government's myopic refusal to view the unfolding political situation in Central America in terms other than that of an international communist conspiracy taking place in its own "backyard" serves only to legitimate and to perpetuate the slaughter. Listen. Can't you hear? The screaming grows louder. □

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Reviewed by ANTHEA KYLE

AS CHILDREN, OUR first exposure to literature generally takes the form of the short story, whether it be Richard Scarry's *Busy World* or the more traditional Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen fairytales. As we grow into reading adults, our concentration-span lengthens, and we become able to sustain our interest throughout whole novels. Yet there often remains within us the need to return to the compactness and succinct prose of the short story.

Short stories are eminently portable. They can be enjoyed before sleep, while waiting for an appointment, during travel, in any number

Writing truth with a twist

of situations and locations. The art of short-story writing is highly specialized: Good novelists can be mediocre short-story writers; similarly, good short-story writers sometimes turn out bland novels.

It was therefore a pleasure to read Kildare Dobbs' new book, *Pride and Fall*: a novella and six short stories — especially interesting because the novella, though good, lacks the poignancy found in the other stories. Evidently for Dobbs, like Polonius, brevity is the soul of wit.

The novella, *Pride and Fall*, is set in East Africa and follows the journey of Russell, a district officer who commits a minor impropriety. He is punished by the colonial powers that be, is imprisoned in a labor camp and

ultimately returns to England, embittered and perversely glorified by those who wish him to serve his country by espionage.

Paralleling Russell's weird odyssey is the East African colony's bid for freedom from British rule. Russell's disillusionment is effectively juxtaposed with the enthusiasm and innovative fervor of the emerging nation. In the end, Russell is the stranger in a strange land; his adoptive home of East Africa is filled with naive belief in the future and the possibilities of freedom.

Of the short stories, one is set in Ireland and another in Scotland and Italy, with the remaining four taking place in East Africa. All the stories

have a subtle and compassionate understanding of life's big and little tragicomedies. At times, Dobbs chooses to expose the corruption and hypocrisy of militant imperialism. In other stories, he underlines the pathos inherent in man's experiences.

Good short stories focus on an event which has some kind of universal meaning and relevance. In these times of huge and monolithic novels when many writers need a good editor as much as a publisher, it is comforting to know that the short story still survives (and prevails) as an art form. Kildare Dobbs' sinewy prose, inventive situations and empathic characters follow in the tradition of other superb storytellers: truth with a twist. □

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