Voices from the Dark: Recent Writing on Guatemala

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Little by little heavy shadows and black night enveloped our fathers and grandfathers and us also ... .
The Annals of the Cakchiquels (*ca.* 1600)

The conquest of America by imperial Spain was one in which words, as well as action, figured prominently. Archives and libraries from Seville to Chicago, from San Francisco to Santiago de Chile, are filled with documents that reflect unequivocally the Hispanic belief that nothing exists unless it is written. This predilection has made it possible for scholars to piece together historical reconstructions of a quality, nuance and texture few other records of colonial enterprise permit.[1] The pen is not only mightier than the sword: its work is also more mindful of posterity. Somewhat ironically, poorer record-keeping in Latin America throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries means our knowledge of these more modern times, compared to present thinking on the colonial period, is partial and blurred.

As in the sixteenth century, so in the 1980s has the *reconquest* of Central America much to do with words. Sandinista victory in Nicaragua in July 1979 focussed international attention on Central America. Status as a media event, in turn, has unleashed a flood of articles, books, documentaries, and speeches

GIFT OF THE DEVIL: A History of Guatemala. Jim Handy. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984. Pp. 319. $12.95, paper.

COFFEE AND PEASANTS: The Origins of the Modern Plantation Economy in Guatemala, 1853-1897. Julio Castellanos Cambranes. Stockholm: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1985. Pp. 334. $10.50, paper.

I, RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ: An Indian Woman in Guatemala. Rigoberta Menchú. Ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. Trans. Ann Wright. London: Verso, 1984. Pp. xxi + 252. $8.95, paper.

RITES: A Guatemalan Boyhood. Victor Perera. New York and Toronto: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1986. Pp. vii + 194. $15.95.

BIRD OF LIFE, BIRD OF DEATH: A Naturalist's Journey Through a Land of Political Turmoil. Jonathan Evan Maslow. New York: Simon and Schuster; Toronto: Monarch Books, 1986. Pp. 249. $17.95.

that attempt, in particular, to explain current political unrest to a North American audience. In terms of published matter, more has been written on Central America over the past several years than at any juncture in the region's history. Despite this deluge – a cynic might argue because of it – ignorance abounds. Our understanding remains at best hazy and indistinct, our insights shallow and clichéd. A lot has changed in Central America since the time of O. Henry, but the view persists of "little *opéra-bouffe* nations ... . reclined, in the mid-day heat, like some vacuous beauty lounging in a guarded harem."[2] Myths that linger indicate not only ineffective communication but inadequate and perishable research. One suspects that not much of the recent literature pertaining to Central America will be read, let alone considered relevant, a decade or two from now.

Why might this be so? As is often the case, there are few incontrovertible answers. But one observation, at least, seems to hold as the interested reader is engulfed by print: there is little awareness of, or sensitivity to, context and perspective.

Perhaps the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes has coined the best term for this malady. He describes it, in one of his 1984 Massey lectures, as "historical amnesia."[3] Historical amnesia as diagnosed by Fuentes is a condition that afflicts most journalists and members of government commissions who weave their way south in order to send north news we can trust and words we can act upon. That the cultural arrogance of such an "exchange" goes all but unnoticed is as worrisome as the fact that such profoundly problematical behaviour is considered normal, if not commendable. Imagine, for example, how indignant or dismissive we would be if Honduran statesmen, none of whom knew much English, travelled through the Northwest Territories and later spoke only of the inordinate levels of alcoholism they encountered. What would be our reaction to the scoop of a Nicaraguan news team who advised an attentive global audience that logging operations come before issues of the environment or Haida rights in the Queen Charlotte Islands? A crisis of representation, argue George Marcus and Michael Fischer, today plagues the human sciences, a crisis that arises "from uncertainty about adequate means of describing social reality."[4]

With the possible exception of Belize, no country in Central America suffers more from inadequate description than does Guatemala. Its social reality, to be sure, is alarmingly complex, the layers of complexity rooted in a colonial experience that saw Maya Indians resist and survive the Spanish conquest. It is a sinister yet alluring land, a dark beauty that hurts. Its countryside is made up of unusual pieces of earth, in places rugged and mournful, in places silky and ethereal, always kaleidoscopic in the passage of light. It haunts, in precipitous ways, most people not from there but who spend time there. Its effect

dwells, in the heart and in the gut, long after departure. Such unique configurations of culture and landscape as Guatemala exhibits, but especially the country's emotional impact, do not succumb easily to conventional means of representation. Coming to terms with Guatemala calls for a form of discourse in which different voices are heard and are listened to. Some of the voices speaking from the five books here reviewed sound familiar and at times predictable. Others are exotic and fresh. For various reasons, not always positive or good, all demand a response.

Anyone who wishes to study Guatemala seriously can turn to Jim Handy's *Gift of the Devil* and be guided through Guatemalan history, from conquest in the sixteenth century to counter-insurgency in the twentieth, by a skilled if uneven effort. Currently a lecturer in history at the University of Saskatchewan, Handy wrote *Gift of the Devil* while completing doctoral research on the 1945 to 1954 reforms of Presidents Arévalo and Arbenz, the so-called "ten years of spring" in Guatemalan historiography. Handy's achievement serves not only as an inspiration to toiling graduate students but, more importantly, sets an example for professors who fail or refuse to transcend the confines of academia. Handy demonstrates in a creative manner that it is possible for academics to convey the fruits of their investigations to a general readership without any scholarly compromise.

What is clearly a compromise in Handy's case, however, is the decision to devote more than two-thirds of his book to the post-1944 period. While the author himself admits that "the long colonial period shaped much of modern Guatemala," he deals with three centuries of Spanish-Maya adaptation rather summarily in sixteen pages. The peasant uprising led by Rafael Carrera, the liberal reforms of President Justo Rufino Barrios, and the entrenchment of the United Fruit Company under Manuel Estrada Cabrera and Jorge Ubico are concisely handled in synthetic chapters of about twenty pages each. Thereafter, or from 1944 on, analysis becomes more original and discussion more detailed.

As modern history, *Gift of the Devil* has few equals, precisely because the events and circumstances of Guatemalan life during the four decades since the "revolution" of 1944 are what Handy knows most about. Particularly important is his portrayal of the Arévalo-Arbenz years as being, in essence, ones of capitalistic not communistic experimentation. He points out, as has Robert Wasserstrom, that the social and economic reforms attempted by Arbenz constituted "a modest program, not a daring one" and that the ill-fated president "sought mitigation, not metamorphosis."[5] The United States, however, viewed things differently. Misrepresenting the initiatives of Arbenz as a "communist threat," the Eisenhower administration, through the CIA, worked with Guatemalan opposition forces to bring about the collapse, in 1954, of the

democratically-elected Arbenz government. Since the overthrow of Arbenz, no government in Guatemala has ever again attempted to deal meaningfully with structural inequities that, by giving little to many and much to a few, ensure constant political unrest. Handy concludes, bleakly but realistically, that "unless and until revolt is seen as a response to economic and social oppression and responded to with policies designed to end that oppression, it will continue to be endemic in Guatemala, snuffed out in one corner, only to flare up in another."

The era Handy dispenses with succinctly in one chapter, the emergence of Guatemala as a "coffee republic" in the late nineteenth century, constitutes the entire focus of the pioneering work in agricultural history and political economy by Julio Castellanos Cambranes. A Guatemalan scholar who drifts back and forth between self-imposed exiles abroad, Castellanos intends *Coffee and Peasants* to be the first volume of a trilogy designed to trace "the history of agricultural development in Guatemala over the last one hundred and fifty years." Drawing almost exclusively from unpublished archival sources, Castellanos reconstructs in assiduous detail the extent to which the drive towards modernization under the stewardship of President Barrios (1873-1885) was motored by an attack on Indian land and an assault on Indian labour. For village after village throughout rural Guatemala, Castellanos documents the transformation, in the name of progress, of communal holdings into private estates, of full-time subsistence farmers into part-time coffee pickers.

The material Castellanos has unearthed during years of painstaking research should help dispel two persistent obfuscations about Guatemala. First, it was in the course of the liberal reforms last century, not during the colonial period, that the expropriation of Indian lands became a crucial issue. Second, Indian resistance to what Castellanos calls "the first dictatorship of the landlords" is shown to have been significantly more intense and widespread than previously thought.

If the material Castellanos works with is new and exciting, the same cannot be said about his way of presenting it. Handy's prose is crisp and tight, written in a lucid style that successfully blends his academic and journalistic proclivities. By contrast, Castellanos comes across in loose, rambling and opaque waves. This may in part be due to inevitable difficulties in translating from Spanish into English, for the text has a wooden resonance throughout. Equally disconcerting is Castellanos' tone, which is at times so lifelessly Marxist as to create an uncomfortable distance between the author and the reality he is attempting to depict. The subject Castellanos has chosen to investigate is too important to be treated in a manner only specialists will tolerate or understand. In his next two volumes, Castellanos must find a more communicative voice with which to contextualize and render more accessible the occurrences of a

period critical to any informed discussion of contemporary Guatemala. Producing a text in which copious transcriptions allow the documents to tell their own story is not enough. Effective if not empathic representation of what Bronislaw Malinowski and Clifford Geertz call "the native's point of view" requires more responsible and attuned mediation between audience and source than Castellanos provides.[6]

Unlike Castellanos, the voice of Rigoberta Menchú is warm, animated and speaks directly to anyone who cares to listen. Hers is a remarkable story, not least because, as a Quiché-Mayan Indian, she had to learn the language of the conqueror in order to understand and tell it properly. Recounted in Spanish over a period of one week to Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, who transcribed and edited taped conversations "to give her words the permanency of print," *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is an absorbing oral history that speaks as much for an entire people as one person.

Menchú begins her testimony by telling about her father, her mother, her brothers and sisters, and growing up not just in the remote highland village where she was born but also on plantations on the Pacific coast where, like most Indian families, hers spent part of each year picking coffee or cotton. Her description of migrant life on the plantations, where she began work at age eight, is incisive and moving, her description of community life in the highlands vivid and thick. Her experience, when she was twelve, of serving as a maid for a wealthy family in Guatemala City is relived with a Dickensian eye for detail, especially for the sordid specifics of human greed and degradation. Washing dishes and mopping floors, however, was not without reward, for it was in such exploited employment that Menchú gained some knowledge of Spanish.

Acquiring Spanish changed her life radically. Following the example of her father, a community activist, Menchú in 1977 joined a peasant organization responsible for raising the political consciousness of rural workers. Being bilingual meant that Menchú, as well as working in her own and other Quiché-speaking communities, could travel throughout Guatemala and communicate with Ladinos, Spanish-speaking persons of mixed European and Maya descent who, in her own words, "also live in terrible conditions, the same as we [Indians] do." By the late 1970s, as civil war between guerrilla insurgents and the national armed forces began to take a heavy toll, Menchú found herself firmly on the side of the former, committed to revolution as the only means of achieving peasant demands for human rights and social justice in Guatemala.

Counter-insurgency has scarred Menchú's life, like so many others, in horrible ways. On 23 September 1979, in the company of her parents and fellow villagers, she watched as Guatemalan soldiers tortured and burned alive her

sixteen-year-old brother and several others accused of sympathizing with the guerrillas. Four months later her father was also burned alive, trapped in a blaze that destroyed the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City when it was fired at by security forces ordered to end a peaceful occupation by Indian leaders protesting against repression in the countryside. In April 1980, her mother was kidnapped, beaten and raped, and then left to die after being dumped by the army on a deserted hillside far from the Menchú family home.

The wave of state terror responsible for the deaths of Menchú's mother, father and brother, along with the slaughter of tens of thousands of others, has momentarily lapsed. Believing itself triumphant in the fight against communism, the Guatemalan military has relinquished its hold on formal political office and allowed a civilian government once again to rule Guatemala. If peace has returned to the towns and villages of rural Guatemala, it is an unsettling and untenable peace, the peace of the dead. Only when the lives, and deaths, of people like Menchú and her kin are seen as creations of a society in fundamental need of change will Guatemala break from its sickening post-Arbenz dynamic of recurring cycles of violence.

Very distinct from how Rigoberta Menchú grew up, but equally fascinating as a personal memoir, is the Guatemalan boyhood of Victor Perera. Not highland cornfields or lowland plantations but the streets, schools, parks, and plazas of downtown Guatemala City are the setting of Perera's tale. Born into a comfortable Jewish family who operated a general store on the main street of the capital, Perera's world at first appears to be the antithesis of Menchú's – privileged, sheltered, self-sustaining, seemingly beyond the reach in real life of the bogeys that stalk the boy's dreams at night. But as the years pass the Perera cocoon is penetrated by values and prejudices over which young Victor has no control. Chata, his beloved Indian nursemaid, is murdered by a jealous admirer – "seven knife stabs in the very heart" – after she drops off her charge at school. In school, a lonely Jewish boy is easy prey for bullying Catholics, who pick on him during recess as the devil who killed Christ, and who humiliate him by stripping off his trousers to examine his "bald-headed pigeon." By the time his family leaves Guatemala to live in the United States, in September 1945 when the author was eleven, Perera is prepared to discard his past and assume an American identity he has already cultivated by reading Walt Disney comics and watching Hollywood movies.

Guatemala, however, does not loosen its hold that easily. Perera ends *Rites* by describing three return visits in which the small and random violences of childhood assume larger, premeditated dimensions. Shortly before one return, his best friend at school, a French boy nicknamed Coco who worked in adult life as a union organizer under Arbenz, committed suicide. During another,

he learned from the brother of a recently-killed cousin that the latter's mysterious death during a fishing trip "was no accident," that the deceased, a successful businessman with risky right-wing connections, "woke up every day with the expectation that he would be killed or kidnapped." A return in 1981 brought Perera together with fifteen former schoolmates, most of whom he had not seen in thirty-six years. At the reunion Perera's "old tormentor and class bully," one of the few present who was not, in part, educated abroad, became obnoxiously drunk and reinstated the reign of terror he ruled by in fourth grade. The bully's chilling tirade is not so much Guatemalan theatre as real life in party dress:

> If you're educated and trained abroad, then you should stay abroad ... . In a few years I will be head of surgery in the government, and I will have something to say about who gets licenses to practise medicine in this country, and who doesn't. Then we shall see just how far rich parents, foreign training, and all the other little privileges get you ... . You pricks all think you're better than me because you studied abroad and married foreign pussy. Because I have Indian blood in my veins you think that makes you better than me? You wait. I'll put you all in your places. I know your secrets, all of you. Not one of you can escape me.

Poignant, compelling and eloquently crafted, *Rites* belongs to a special genre of autobiographical sociology in which the understanding of place becomes the discovery of self.

No such illumination runs through Jonathan Maslow's *Bird of Life, Bird of Death*, one of the most superficial and ill-informed pieces of chic journalism on Central America ever to appear. Maslow, self-described as a "fanatical birder" and an "addicted traveler" who, "like most men," fancies himself "something of a political expert," ostensibly travelled to Guatemala and stayed there for a month in order to study a rare and beautiful bird known as the quetzal. Rather than confine himself to natural history, his professed field of expertise and one he writes on with some insight, Maslow combines his interest in the quetzal with his penchant for analyzing current affairs. The result – "a kind of essay in political ornithology" – is a bog of inaccuracies, misconceptions, impressionistic musings, and cavalier superiority of a type increasingly common among journalists who cover, either by choice or by designation, the Central American beat. Being good at anything surely begins with some inner awareness of where personal limits may lie.

Among many transgressions that erode his credibility is Maslow's speculation that "the population of Guatemala City, I suppose, more or less reflects that of the country as a whole." A closer look, either at the face of the capital

in situ or at literature easily available in Maslow's home town of New York, would indicate otherwise.[7] Elsewhere he holds forth on "Guatemala's infamous fourteen families," presumably confusing them with the even more infamous fourteen families usually discussed in the context of neighbouring El Salvador.[8]

Maslow's failure to inspect or reflect carefully enough, either in the field or in a library, is troublesome enough. Even more lamentable, however, is that intelligent people reviewing his book for eminent publications do not take him to task. Thus the Canadian novelist Graeme Gibson, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, considers Maslow's work "fine" and "wonderful." He even goes so far as to say: "Among the great pleasures afforded by this book, albeit sometimes a melancholy one, is the detail and control of Mr Maslow's information."[9] Other recent writing on Guatemala may be so described, but not that of Maslow. The dark defeats him, as it will all those who parachute in to explore its shape so recklessly, so unknowingly, so disinclined to leave behind, even for a short time, North American or European notions about what life is supposed to be.

Guatemala, I have learned finally to accept, unfolds along a historical trajectory of its own singular elaboration. Some realization of this came to me shortly before Christmas in 1985. On a chilly Saturday afternoon I sat with one of my graduate students in the town square at Sacapulas, a highland town in the northern province of El Quiché, where some of the most horrendous atrocities of the past decade have occurred. As if to drum in the message of government response to insurgent rebellion, a slogan displayed at the army barracks across the plaza grimly pronounced:

> Only he who fights
> has the right to win
>
> Only he who wins
> has the right to live

At a time of alleged peace and good will – for not just Christmas but "democracy," in the form of civilian President Vinicio Cerezo, was about to be celebrated – these words invoked quite contrary sentiments. When I passed through Sacapulas again nine months later, in August 1986, the declaration was still prominently in place, even if the soldiers guarding the barracks looked distinctly off-guard playing basketball with some local schoolgirls. A few weeks earlier, in Verapaz, the "land of true peace," a soldier had fired across my path when the car two friends and I were travelling in tried to pass his jeep. Like the slogan at Sacapulas, that single shot said it all. The army, not Vinicio Cerezo, controls Guatemala. It determines who proceeds and who stays behind. Its voice screams loudest from the dark.

1 For a review of this literature, see W. George Lovell, "Rethinking Conquest: The Colonial Experience in Latin America," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 12 (1986), pp. 310-17.

2 O. Henry, *Cabbages and Kings* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1909), pp. 9-11.

3 Carlos Fuentes, *Latin America: At War with the Past* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1985), p. 55.

4 George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 8.

5 Robert Wasserstrom, "Revolution in Guatemala: Peasants and Politics under the Arbenz Government," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17 (1975), p. 478.

6 Bronisław Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York: Dutton, 1922), p. 25 and Clifford Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 55-70.

7 See, for example, John D. Early, *The Demographic Structure and Evolution of a Peasant System: The Guatemalan Population* (Boca Raton: Univ. Presses of Florida, 1982) and Francisco Goldman, "Guatemalan Death Masque," *Harper's* (January 1986), pp. 56-57.

8 Marcel Niedergang, "El Salvador," *The Twenty Latin Americas*, Vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 335-36.

9 Graeme Gibson, "Quetzal and Man in Guatemala," *The New York Times Book Review*, 9 March 1986, pp. 13-14.