

Between War and Peace in
Central America: Choices for Canada
edited by Liisa North and CAPA
Between the Lines, \$40 cloth, \$19 paper

Reviewed by GEORGE LOVELL

FOR OVER 12 years, ever since the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* mobilized to defeat Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, Central America has been in a variable but continuous state of war. However one cares to measure the cost of this war, the price paid is appallingly high.

In military terms, the size of armed forces in the region grew from 48,000 to over 200,000 soldiers in less than a decade, with the annual budget of sustaining them now estimated at some \$700 million. Civilian casualties, as always, are difficult to assess, but the number of dead is reckoned at well over 160,000, with a figure put on the number of displaced 10 times higher. The grisly calculation of the number of persons "disappeared" bestows on Guatemala alone the greatest toll in all Latin America, 40,000 over the past two decades. In economic terms, Central America's external debt 15 years ago was relatively insignificant. Today, servicing arrears of \$24 billion means, for ordinary people, one of the lowest standards of living in the world, for 60 per cent of the region's population currently dwell in conditions the International Labor Organization classifies as extreme poverty.

How this dismal situation came about, and what Canadians and their government might do about it, is explained in this carefully crafted volume edited by Liisa North, a professor of Latin American studies at York University, and members of CAPA (Canadian-Caribbean-Central American Policy Alternatives).

War at our back door



The thrust and premise of the book are made clear at the outset, self-described as "nonpartisan" but decidedly "not neutral." Ms. North and her contributors instead write in a spirit of "confident idealism" and "constructive internationalism," encouraged to do so by the terms of reference of a special parliamentary committee on Canada's foreign relations. A lengthy table of contents maps out thematic terrain with the demands of a disparate audience in mind. There is something here for almost everyone, be they students researching an assignment, church groups working on human rights violations, journalists and politicians in search of statistics, or simply a curious, discerning

reader. Most such collective endeavors suffer from a lack of unity and direction, but disciplined stewardship on the part of Ms. North has ensured a minimum margin of error in this regard.

Despite its wide-ranging reach — to say nothing of the fact that Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica are as different, one to another, as five countries can be — a central theme running throughout is insistence that peace and security in the region will arise only when human rights are genuinely respected. If a country uses its land not to feed its people but to grow cash crops for export, if the proceeds of this arrangement benefit only a fraction of the national

population, if such geographies of inequality are repressively maintained, generation after generation, without any semblance of reform, then human rights are perpetually denied and conflict perpetually guaranteed. Rebellion against the ignominy of this predicament is as home-grown as its cause, a reality successive U.S. administrations have failed to understand, or blindly chosen to ignore. Ms. North and CAPA do not wish the Canadian government to commit the same willful errors; and so spell out concrete recommendations around which Canadian foreign policy can be effectively, and humanistically, enacted.

Canada, as a nation, now exists in a "free-trade" relationship with the U.S., a relationship that one day may also embrace the "other" nation of North America, Mexico. This means, in a very real sense, that Central Americans are fast becoming our next-door neighbors. They presently number as many as we do, 27 million or so, and their haunted, disrupted lives will soon touch ours whether we want them to or not. Some, of course, already have. I happen to live with a Kanjufal Maya refugee who fled Guatemala as a teenager seven years ago and who a week ago became a proud new citizen of Canada. He appreciates, I think, how fortunate he is to be here, but do we realize how far less fortunate are his fellow Central Americans? This book affords us the opportunity to such reflection. War in the Gulf may be over, but war in the isthmus far closer to home rages on — even if CNN has yet to discover and validate it. □

W. George Lovell is a member of the department of geography at Queen's University. In November he testified before the House of Commons Standing Committee on External Affairs and International Trade concerning election milieu and human rights in Guatemala.

Unholy Orders:
Tragedy at Mount Cashel
by Michael Harris
Viking, \$24.95

Reviewed by JENEFER CURTIS

“WE ARE A sinful church ... We are naked. Our anger, our pain, our anguish, our shame and our vulnerability are clear to the world.”

The words of former Archbishop Alphonus Penney reflect the honesty that the Roman Catholic Church had finally to demonstrate in confronting the scandal surrounding Newfoundland's Mount Cashel Orphanage. In the mid-'80s, two popular local priests were charged and convicted of sexual abuse of young boys, an event that stunned the largely sectarian Newfoundland society. Two years later, however, this was overshadowed by the discovery that the Irish Christian Brothers, a lay order of the Catholic Church, had been practising widespread sexual and physical abuse of their charges for over a decade.

Further, as a Royal Commission of Inquiry later discovered, the 1975 police investigation into the events had been a virtual cover-up. The very church and provincial authorities who uncovered the ugly incidents had attempted to remove all references to sexual abuse from the

police report. Justice officials were convinced to bury the alleged crimes of several Christian Brothers accused in the 1975 investigation, and forego police interviews with them.

The details of this cataclysmic discovery are as sordid and troublesome as anyone might imagine. Their presentation in the form of testimony from Mount Cashel's victims is what gives Michael Harris's *Unholy Orders* its cutting edge as best-seller material — that, in addition to the spirited anecdotes and political gossip Mr. Harris interjects to round out an unsettling slice of reality.

Michael Harris is a journalist with obvious Sherlock Holmesian capacities. The executive director of news at the Newfoundland Broadcasting Corporation, he has won recognition for the role he has played in sparking several Royal Commissions of Inquiry. The wrongful conviction of Micmac Donald Marshall inspired his first book, *Justice Denied*.

His calling to the Mount Cashel case came when the tragedy personified walked into his Newfoundland office. Shane Earle, a waiter, was the first of the Mount Cashel victims to publicly re-

lay his harrowing experiences. Later, Mr. Earle would also be the first of several victims to sue the Newfoundland government. His association with Mr. Earle might offer some explanation of Mr. Harris's seeming preoccupation with the lurid details of the victims' experiences — either this or an understanding of the tastes of some of the reading public. In any event, an otherwise scholarly account of the incidents is somewhat cheapened by a proliferation of detailed quotations and affected passages like the following: "Later, when the boys were drowsy, he would take them upstairs and put them to bed — but not to rest up for the coming day."

These intrusions demonstrate that Mr. Harris's determination to enlist sympathy for young men like Shane Earle is matched only by his resolve to tell a good story. Without ever losing track of the chronological unravelling of the Mount Cashel story, he paints the political events around the affair in highly entertaining colors. He includes eyebrow-raising tidbits about several personalities and never misses a chance to poke the government for a patronage

appointment, even less-consequential ones like Premier Clyde Wells's appointment of Liberal MNA Beaton Hulk as ADM of Social Services. (Despite its public denouncement several days later, this still gets a dose of Mr. Harris's sarcasm: "It was a strange way to blaze a badly needed new trail in child welfare in Newfoundland.")

Similarly, in a chapter titled *Keeping The Lid On*, in which he recreates the fiasco surrounding the fire in the prestigious Towers apartment building, allegedly set alight to destroy police documents related to the Mount Cashel case, Mr. Harris's editorial comments and accounts of heated exchanges between characters are witty and engaging.

At the same time, he doesn't lose sight of his initial mission — to impress upon us that gross injustices caused irreparable damage to upward of 50 young men. A corollary of this is his keenness to pinpoint why the abuse took place. The book's troublesome evidence demonstrates that the Roman Catholic community was initially more concerned with the tarnishing of its reputation than with confronting such fundamental causal issues as a priest's vow of celibacy. □

Jenefer Curtis is an Ottawa-based freelance writer specializing in Canadian politics.