

An essay
by W. GEORGE LOVELL

OVER THE PAST few years, I have become increasingly uneasy about the content and reliability of reports relayed to the general public by the foreign press, particularly in its coverage of Latin America, a major world region of considerable political volatility and an area Canada needs desperately to understand and to communicate with better.

I voice my concern primarily as a scholar and a teacher very much aware of, and somewhat distressed at, the power commanded by the printed word or the screened image in shaping attitudes and moulding opinion. Newspaper readers — and television viewers possibly even more so — must constantly bear in mind that members of the media responsible for sending home news from abroad are human, and therefore capable of error.

Sometimes journalists make factual mistakes, such as misnaming and mislocating the places in which events occur, or spelling incorrectly the currency of a country under discussion, or not quite doing justice to a local turn of phrase. Other times, however, journalists make mistakes that involve errors of judgement, that entail errors of assessment. More gravely, journalists occasionally make mistakes that inevitably prompt scepticism about how familiar they are with their subject matter, how well they know the land and the people comprising their "beat," and the extent of their personal experience of the situations and circumstances about which they write and, consequently, "inform" us.

Such an assertion obviously calls for some specific elaboration. My examples, like my criticism, relate primarily to Latin America. I happened to be in Argentina in February and March of 1976, a crucial juncture in that country's apparently irresolvable contemporary political crisis. The nation's flirtation, yet again, with the vague and problem-ridden philosophy of Peronism had wrought havoc with the lives of most Argentinians. Complaints about the *situación* — soaring inflation, violence and terrorism, strike after strike, the worthlessness of the peso on the international money market, the price of food, the lack of opportunity, chronic government graft and ineptitude — were bitter and widespread, and were articulated by every class of Argentinean society.

To anyone there then who read the many daily newspapers or conversed with people in the streets, it was obvious that a military coup against the government of Isabel Perón was imminent. Almost daily, the Argentinean press, whether the conservative, pro-military *La Prensa*, or Jacobo Timmerman's more liberal and level-headed *La Opinión*, or even the outspoken English language daily, *The Buenos Aires Herald*, would report mysterious top-rank meetings between powerful figures in the national army, airforce and navy, mentioning troop manoeuvres, mobilizations and various other activities that could be interpreted in one way only: namely, that Mrs. Perón's days as *La Señora Presidente* were numbered.

When the coup was finally unleashed, on March 22-23, it was, in Argentina, an expected and anticipated event, even if the horrendous

Get the facts straight

brutality which accompanied it was not. That the *golpe* (coup) came to the rest of the world as a bolt from the blue, to me reflected fundamental shortcomings in the activities of Latin American correspondents whose job it was to keep up with such things.

Events in Nicaragua are, I think, a further example. The odious Somoza regime, seemingly one of the most invincible of all Latin American dictatorships, was considered well-nigh immovable by most foreign observers even as late as 1978. History has now recorded how much they underestimated the will of the Nicaraguan people, all classes of whom were incensed at, and personally affected by, the gargantuan greed of Somoza following the Managua earthquake of Dec. 23, 1972, when international relief funds for reconstruction and assistance were pocketed by the dictator, turning even his staunchest civilian supporters against him. Thereafter, it was a man and his henchman, Somoza and his U.S.-trained and equipped National Guard, against the rest of the country. Massive popular opposition to Somoza's rule was a critical factor in his ouster, in July, 1979, and the intensity and unanimity of that opposition was not adequately monitored or reported.

Another instance of shoddy journalism, in a specifically Canadian context, concerns the *Globe and Mail's* coverage of current events in a sorely troubled part of Latin America, Guatemala. After seven years of studying and visiting Guatemala as a doctoral and post-doctoral researcher, I think I know the country and its inhabitants fairly well. It came as a surprise, therefore, to read in a *Globe* article by its Latin American correspondent, Oakland Ross, that there was a guerrilla group he referred to as "the ERP. Spanish acronym for the Revolutionary Army of the People," waging an armed struggle against the Guatemalan government.

At first I thought Ross was confusing, or muddling linguistically, the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP — the Guerrilla Army of the Poor) with the *Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo Armado* (ORPA — the Revolutionary Organization of People in Arms). Although both these groups fight relentlessly against government forces, they take pains to point out the differences between themselves, and usually operate in different regions of Guatemala, the EGP predominantly in the remote and mountainous northwest, the ORPA mostly in the Costa Sur, or Pacific piedmont, of the country. However, it was not until I attended a campus screening of a film from El Salvador, entitled *El Pueblo Vencerá: The People Will Win*, that I realized that Ross had not simply mixed up the names of guerrilla groups, he apparently had incorrectly associated them with the wrong country.

This struck me, as a scene from the Salvadorean film flashed across the screen: forlorn-looking street, a row of buildings, a whitewashed wall daubed with three red letters (painted in blood?) "ERP." The *Ejército Revolucionario Popular* or the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP — The Revolutionary Army of the People) operates, so it seems, not in

Guatemala but in neighboring El Salvador.

To many, this observation may amount to very little. After all, they would say, one Central American nation is much like another; are they not all backward, impoverished "banana republics" where repression and bloodshed are endemic? NO, they are not, and they never have been. Journalists, like teachers, must strive to demythologise such stereotypes. Furthermore, such reporting carries with it a potentially alarming undercurrent. If our foreign correspondents do not have a firm grasp of the features that distinguish one political faction or one nation state from another, then how can they effectively come to terms with more complex and subtler issues, let alone convey an informed and inspired sense of them to their readers?

Part of the problem arises from asking one person to cover too large and diverse an area. If a correspondent is constantly on the move from airport to airport, from hotel to hotel, from deadline to deadline, then it is small wonder that the communications wired to head office contain but little substance, little analysis, little interpretation, and more than the occasional fault.

ANOTHER ASPECT of the problem stems from the periodicity of reporting. Guatemala, for example, prior to the recent upsurge of violence in Central America, was paid only sporadic attention by the media. Consequently, there is a tendency on the part of reporters, when they do fly in (and leave shortly thereafter), to condense events that occurred over a long stretch of time into one or two short dispatches, thus imparting to readers or viewers a series of possibly false or misleading impressions. Such journalistic "telescoping," concentrating on strife, turmoil, or disaster, does little to promote Canadian consciousness of Guatemala beyond the negative image usually ascribed to most Third World countries. And this is grossly unfair. The physical beauty, the cultural richness and the economic potential of Guatemala are as staggering as the current level of political violence is appalling.

Foreign correspondents pursue a difficult and often dangerous occupation, one that demands, among other things, no small amount of courage, ingenuity and perseverance. Obviously, when one's life is threatened, or when a visa is not extended, or when censorship is enforced, or when communication links with the outside world are severed, it is difficult to do a competent, let alone thorough, job. But when these exigencies do not prevail, or can be considered negligible, surely the need for diligent and sensitive reporting can be fulfilled only by journalists who, over the years, have truly developed a feel for a region and its peoples, who have painstakingly cultivated a firsthand awareness of the problems that beset them and who realise that understanding contemporary crises frequently requires a detailed examination of the cultural-historical context in which events take place.

Sending into a "trouble spot" a

team of men and women who have limited personal experience of the realities of life there is less than satisfactory, and can result in disaster, as in the sad case of American newsman Bill Stewart. When Stewart's chilling assassination by a Nicaraguan national guardsman was broadcast over network television (June, 1979) it was not sufficiently pointed out to millions of outraged viewers that the victim, with apparently no command whatsoever of Spanish and a totally inadequate knowledge of Nicaraguan affairs, had been flown into the country only a few days before. Stewart's death was tragic, wasteful and senseless, but the practice of covering events in such a fashion doubtlessly still continues.

All this is in no way to suggest that Latin American correspondents never deliver critical, substantive and informative dispatches, ones that reflect keen comprehension, to millions of readers, viewers and listeners throughout the world. There are some fine individuals whose consistent and excellent performance, I think, set standards to which their fellow correspondents should aspire. Alan Riding of *The New York Times*, whose intellectual range and insight anyone interested in learning would admire and respect, is in an impressive class of his own. Fortunately for the Kingston community, *The Whig-Standard* regularly runs Riding's correspondence by using *The New York Times* News Service.

Marcel Niedergang's reporting for the *Paris Le Monde*, which forms the cornerstone of a number of his books, is another positive frame of reference. James Nelson Goodsell of *The Christian Science Monitor* also makes worthwhile reading, as does, occasionally, Bernard Diederich, for over 15 years a correspondent for *Time* magazine and the author of several books, written mostly in a popular vein, about Latin American affairs.

Visually, the photographs of Susan Meiselas, which appear frequently in *Newsweek* and *Harper's* (to name but two magazines), always have much to say about Latin American life, its pathos, its agony, yet — in spite of everything — its enduring humanity. A look at the photographs comprising her new book on Nicaragua tell the wretched tale of that country with poignant and measured compassion. And finally, to end with two commendable Canadian endeavors, the CBC programs *Man Alive* and *The Fifth Estate* usually make for fruitful viewing when focussing on Latin America.

South of the Rio Grande, Canada shares this hemisphere with a complex cultural assortment of over 350 million people. This number will increase by the turn of the century to more than 500 million. We, the gringos of the far north, in order to convince the people of Latin America that our view of the world is different from that of the gringos immediately to the south of us, need to have open, flexible, synthetic and meaningful lines of communication with our hemispherical partners beyond the United States. The role of the foreign correspondent, like that of every educator, is obviously a critical one. They need to send home the right stuff. □

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