

# Between the eagle and bear

El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War  
Edited by Marvin E. Gettleman, et al  
Grove, \$10.50

Bitter Grounds: Roots of Revolt in El Salvador  
By Liisa North  
Between the Lines, \$7.95

Reviewed by GEORGE LOVELL

People change, and smile:  
but the agony abides.

T. S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages*

MAY 27, 1975. A humid tropical evening in San Salvador, the capital city of the smallest of all the Central American republics, El Salvador. Tired after a long slow bus journey (I had left Nicaragua before dawn the previous day and had travelled overland through Honduras) I sit with a beer and a sandwich in a downtown café. None of the other sidewalk tables are occupied, the few clients apparently feeling happier in off the street with their music, chatter, and drink. I choose not to stay for long, pay my bill, and am about to walk back to a nearby *perón* when I notice, curled in a doorway adjacent to the café, the sleeping rag-clad form of a young boy of perhaps seven or eight years of age.

The noise of some people leaving the café disturbs him, and he starts awake. Frightened, alone, unsure of where he is, he begins to cry. I crouch beside him, seeking to console him, and through tears learn that he is parentless, homeless, hungry, and very much on his own. His name, he tells me, is Marcos Antonio Hernández. Completely at a loss, I approach a waiter for advice. He shrugs his shoulders, saying he can take the boy to a children's centre run by the Church on his way home from work. I ask him to do this, give him a tip, and buy some food for the boy, whom I leave quietly eating (he even managed a smile) as I head off for what turned out to be a fitful unquiet sleep.

I mention this incident because the sight of Marcos Antonio Hernández, huddled womb-like on a dark doorstep, seemed to rise out from every page of these two provocative volumes — *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War* and *Bitter Grounds: Roots of Revolt in El Salvador*. His urchin vulnerability was somehow there with each reference to El Salvador's countless thousands of luckless and, for most of us, nameless oppressed: among the jobless and underemployed in the shanties of the capital; among the landless and exploited in the countryside; among the displaced and neglected rotting in refugee camps; among the 38,000 already killed in the brutal civil war which has raged since October, 1979; among the many helpless victims yet to fall.

Now (if still alive) in his teens, and



A guerrilla at his post in war-torn El Salvador where elections will be held tomorrow

therefore of combat age, perhaps he left the city to join the guerrillas fighting in the hills. On the other hand, possibly he views enlisting in the national armed forces as his best chance of long-term survival and security. I see him mesmerized by the sterile ideological rhetoric of ignorant men in distant lands, as a frail and defenseless creature preyed upon both by (American) eagles and (Soviet) bears, as an animal doomed by some inexorable law of social Darwinism to exist in a perilous shadowland between two hostile predators. That boy is a Third World everyman, an everyman whose options have for centuries been meagre and few. These books are about him and his kind.

*Bitter Grounds* is a useful introduction to the tragedy of El Salvador for readers with little background knowledge of the cultural and historical antecedents of the current political crisis. It is ideal, in particular, for all those interested in exploring beyond a sensational headline or a two-minute newsreel but who cannot afford the luxury of more minutely detailed and elaborate investigations. The book is essentially a synthesis of important secondary sources — in both Spanish and English — and distilled into slightly more than 100 pages of, for the most part, tightly written and perceptive analysis.

Liisa North, a professor of political science at York University, is to be applauded for undertaking a task sadly neglected by too many academics: the production of work which reflects high professional standards but which nonetheless is accessible and comprehensible to the general public. Although written from a radical perspective, little stylistic jargon is permitted to taint a fairly objective and, at times, almost dispassionate portrayal of the tortured contours of Salvadorean life, from the establishment of the nation as a "coffee republic" in the late 19th century, through the peasant revolt of 1932 and the "soccer war" with Honduras in 1969, until the bloody turmoil of the past two years.

A chapter by Tim Drayman concludes the book by sketching the official Canadian position on El Salvador, one in which Ottawa appears to toe the American line. With respect to U.S. military support of the ruling Salvadorean junta, Canadian external affairs minister Mark MacGuigan once remarked: "I would certainly not condemn any decision the United States takes to send offensive arms to El Salvador."

For those with some background knowledge of the present situation and of the superpower manipulation behind the "regionalization" and "internationalization" of the conflict, the collection of writings comprising *El Salvador* offers stimulating and fruitful, if at times horrific, reading. The editors' choice is eclectic, ranging from U.S. State Department "White Papers" to left-wing revolutionary broadcasts to communiques released by ultra-right "death squads." Thus, ideologically, every prevailing point of view of the crisis is represented, with readers given ample opportunity to draw their own conclusions, even though the editors themselves seldom seek to disguise personal sympathies in favor of the popular forces fighting to overthrow the present civilian-military junta.

The book, 54 essays in all, is divided into six parts, with each part and the chapters comprising it prefaced by clear and concise introductions. Part One, entitled *Seeing Red: The Reagan Administration Looks at the World*, sets the global context, with words from President Reagan, Secretary of State Alexander Haig, and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick justifying the severing of détente between Washington and Moscow and laying the logic and groundrules for American foreign policy, now essentially defined as "anti-Sovietism."

The previous Carter administration's human rights policy is dismissed flatly as utopian, serving ultimately only to advance communism and thus to threaten the national in-

terest of the United States, especially in its own "backyard," Latin America. A distinction is made between regimes that are "authoritarian" (good: e.g. Nicaragua under Somoza) and "totalitarian" (bad: e.g. Nicaragua under the Sandinistas). The former, claims Ms. Kirkpatrick, should be supported because, historically, relations with them have been friendly and because they "do not disturb the habitual rhythms of work and leisure, habitual places of residence, habitual patterns of family and personal relations." She further asserts that "because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope, as children born to untouchables in India acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for survival in the miserable roles they are destined to fill." Two essays, by Michael Walzer and Tom J. Farer, demolish this perspective as naive, elitist, culturally insensitive and hopelessly out of touch with the realities of Latin America in the 1980s.

The readings forming Part Two, *Social Forces and Ideologies in the Making of Contemporary El Salvador*, discuss the cultural-historical specifics involved in the forging of a nation which was founded upon the governing of a disadvantaged many by a privileged few. A geography of inequality has always prevailed (as late as 1971, six families alone held as much land as 80 per cent of the rural population together). No government has ever seriously considered widespread socio-economic reforms, simply because it has not been in its class interest to do so.

Thus the most productive agricultural land produces coffee and cotton for export, not staple foodcrops needed to feed malnourished and undernourished local populations. Wealth is equated with political clout, with the legendary, oligarchical "14 families," in conjunction with the armed forces spawned to protect them, acting as deadly-efficient powerbrokers whose primary objective is self-preservation, the maintenance of the status quo. Change by way of the ballot box has been constantly thwarted by rigged and fraudulent elections. Here, democracy and suffrage have little meaning or relevance. Any transformation, any attempt to ameliorate the lives of the poor by curtailing the avarice and ostentation of the rich must alas be fought for.

In Part Three, *Aspects of the Present Crisis*, attention is focussed on a number of themes, including: the

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heterogeneous nature of the opposition, operating under the political rubric of the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) and the military command of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN); the appalling human wreckage of the war, with most of the casualties coming from the civilian population caught in the cross-fire between the armed forces and the guerrillas; the ill-fated agrarian reform, a sad case of too little, too late; and the role of the Catholic Church in the popular struggle. This last subject is one of crucial pertinence in the case of El Salvador.

For centuries the Church in Latin America sided overwhelmingly with the wealthy and the privileged, simply preaching to the impoverished masses that the *hereafter*, not the *here*, was all that should concern them. This questionable philosophy was finally deemed inconsistent with the tenets of Christianity by Pope John XXIII in his revolutionary encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963), thus paving the way for a theology of liberation which aligned the Church more closely with the needs of the poor in this world and not just in the one to come.

The dismembering of the Church from the State, of the cross from the sword, has had profound repercussions throughout Latin America, and in the case of El Salvador made it possible for Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero to pronounce that "when a dictatorship seriously violates human rights and attacks the

common good of the nation, when it becomes unbearable and closes all channels of dialogue, of understanding, of rationality, when this happens, the Church speaks of the legitimate right of insurrectional violence." Romero cast his ultimate lot when he declared to the armed forces on March 23, 1980 that "no soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. It is time to come to your senses and obey your conscience rather than follow sinful commands." After his assassination the next day, Romero (and the priests and nuns killed in El Salvador before and after him) assumed a martyrdom which is no less a threat to the ruling oligarchy than when he (and they) still lived.

Throughout Part Four, The Decision to Intervene, U.S. relations with the Salvadorean government are scrutinized. Moral, economic, and military support of the junta is justified on the grounds that El Salvador and its neighbors are the victims, in the words of Haig, of "a well-orchestrated international Communist campaign" in which the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua are all involved. The "proof" of this alleged involvement is presented in the now infamous White Paper, Communist Interference in El Salvador, a scurrilous document now almost completely discredited, and which is thoroughly torn apart in essays by James Petras and Robert G. Kaiser. Several contributors warn of the danger of El Salvador becoming "another Vietnam," while others advocate a political as opposed to a

military solution in the form of a negotiated settlement, the evolution of Rhodesia into Zimbabwe being cited as a suitable and appropriate model.

Part Five, The 'Dominoes' of Central America, examines the effect that the civil war in El Salvador is having on the internal affairs of adjacent Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Honduras and Guatemala, claims Haig, are next on a "Communist hit list" after El Salvador, while Nicaragua apparently proves his point since it has been "hit" already, a "fallen domino" lost to Cuban and Soviet hordes. Again, this simplistic view of a complex political situation is thoroughly refuted by subsequent essays. Other more realistic views are discussed in Part Six, Policy Perspectives on El Salvador and Central America.

IT IS LEFT FOR a superb piece of writing by the master of contemporary Mexican letters, Carlos Fuentes, to conclude the collection and to weave the disparate strands together. Entitled Farewell, Monroe Doctrine this passionate essay, a Latin American view of Latin American reality, appeared in the August 1981 edition of *Harpers*, and I urge everyone to get hold of it, read it, and pass it on to their friends. Fuentes addresses "that extraordinary mixture of malice and innocence, arrogance and ignorance that has, as a rule, characterized Washington's policies in Latin America." Pointing out that the United States was itself born of revolutionary struggle, Fuentes asks only that the same right to self-determination be ex-

tended to the nations of Latin America.

Instead of asserting that such actions are triggered by communist agitation, Washington should recognize that they occur "for reasons rooted in local culture, history, and economy" and that the problems confronting countries like El Salvador "existed a long time before the United States or the Soviet Union came into being." Fuentes's advice is: "Negotiate. Do not internationalize an internal conflict. Do not invent an East-West confrontation in a land that only requires North-South co-operation."

Washington, alas, is a long way from heeding the sanity and veracity of such advice. But what of Ottawa? Can a nation with as much potential as Canada's, one that is itself situated, albeit geographically, between the eagle and the bear, have so little to offer our hemispherical partners south of the Rio Grande in the hour of need? I think not. But by supporting, as does the United States, the holding of tomorrow's elections in strife-torn El Salvador, elections in which the Democratic Revolutionary Front will not participate because their candidate rolls would soon become "hit lists" in the hands of paramilitary "death squads," Trudeau and MacGuigan serve only to divert their country from the challenge of change in Latin America. □

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Medicine in Canadian Society:  
Historical Perspectives  
Edited by S.E.D. Shortt  
McGill-Queen's University Press, \$23.95

Reviewed by MARY MILLAR

THE PATHS OF history and medicine often intersect. The hemophilia of the Tsarevitch Alexis was a factor in the fall of Imperial Russia; Napoleon's piles may have decided the outcome of Waterloo.

Less dramatically, the outbreak of disease may affect the social history of a nation or a continent. Barbara Tuchman has argued that the Black Death turned medieval minds from acceptance of a fixed order to the reliance on individual conscience which marks the modern world. These are aspects of history which are familiar to students of European history but are not often enough taken into consideration as part of the development of Canada. For instance, in 1775 the Americans put off a planned invasion of Nova Scotia because of an epidemic of smallpox in Halifax. On a wider scale, the contact of Indians and Eskimos with outside traders threw their state of health disastrously out of balance, a balance which may never be restored or redressed. As S.E.D. Shortt points out, "political battles, military campaigns, or economic vicissitudes pale in importance when measured against the impact of even a single cholera epidemic."

Professor Shortt holds the Hannah Chair of the History of Medicine at Queen's University. The 19 first-class essays in this book are predominantly by historians; each is the result of scholarly research into con-

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temporary documents and records, and together they vividly demonstrate the importance of this aspect of history in Canada. Thanks to the essay form, the book is able to break away from over-familiar patterns, particularly the biographical and chronological formats in which earlier Canadian medical historiography tends to be bound.

This is not to condemn these methods — one essayist points out that in more primitive days "medical scientists rose to eminence not by scientific accomplishments so much as by force of personality." Professor Shortt's introductory essay stresses the need to build on and extend the earlier methods. The principles guiding his collection are thematic and interpretive, with the emphasis on the social repercussions of events in Canadian medical history.

The essays selected by Professor Shortt are as judicious and balanced as his own. Michael Bliss's lively 'Pure Books on Avoided Subjects': Pre-Freudian Sexual Ideas in Canada resists any temptation to play on the humorous or the inhibitory aspects of popular puritanical tracts. Instead, their dire warnings against sexual excesses (loss of "vital energy") or masturbation (epileptic fits, total insanity) are placed in a context of contemporary medical thought, based on 19th-century concepts of vital forces in the human organism and direct (if-mistaken) observations of behavior among the mentally ill.

Familiar topics are given fresh



perspectives. The fact of the white man's impact on the health of native peoples is indisputable, but here the assumptions are tested and proved. Robert Fortune draws from the narratives of early explorers a consistent picture of the Eskimos' health before the fatal contact with outsiders. Arthur J. Ray, through a careful examination of Hudson's Bay Company records, produces dates and itineraries for trading expeditions, and shows exactly how and where contagious diseases were thus diffused along the trade routes. Veronica Strong-Boag's Canada's Women Doctors: Feminism Constrained rehearses the pattern of male opposition and female determination, but she also makes the less familiar and perhaps timely point that women's achievements in medicine, as elsewhere, were not the wholly triumphant stereotype which is often assumed. Women still tend to exercise influence within the more limited spheres of the private practice or the local community, and "a maternalist ideology and a professional orientation are hardly the best guarantees of a feminist revolution."

Despite the proximity of the

United States, the Canadian medical experience is shown to be distinguishable from that of its neighbor. The formal structure of medical institutions in Upper and Lower Canada was much more efficiently controlled, in contrast with the proliferation of proprietary schools in the United States, a reflection of Canada's paternalistic, rather than egalitarian society.

Yet Canada was necessarily involved in famous movements in medicine. Several essays document the Canadian role — the spread of Lister's teaching of antiseptics by his Canadian house-surgeon, Archibald Macleod; the early launching (particularly in Ontario) of enlightened public health policies after the new bacteriological discoveries of Koch and Pasteur in Europe; the vigorous introduction of Freudian principles of psychoanalysis to hostile Canadians by Ernest Jones (later Freud's biographer) in the five years he spent in Toronto from 1908 to 1913.

There is also an able account of the Canadian branch of the worldwide "Spanish" influenza epidemic of 1918-19, in which one-sixth of the population was affected and as many as 50,000 died (figures which would gain significance from comparison with Canada's total population, then between seven and eight million).

The introduction to this collection laments that the status of medical history as a discipline is "far from flourishing." The essays themselves, however, amply fulfil the twin requirements of excellence and relevance, and attest to the high standard of the state of the art. □

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