

Guatemala: Witness to slaughter

Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village
by Victor Montejo
translated by Victor Perera
Curbstone Press, \$16.95 (U.S.) cloth, \$8.95 paper

Reviewed by W. GEORGE LOVELL

THIS SHORT BUT intense book is an eyewitness account of counter-insurgency in Guatemala gone awry in the most tragic way imaginable. It is written in frugal, honed, yet deceptively poised and sophisticated fashion by a Maya Indian whose voice speaks poignantly and eloquently of what has been happening in rural Guatemala for the better part of a decade.

Born of Maya parents, Victor Montejo was raised as an infant in the tradition and customs of his ancestors. Boyhood, however, saw him schooled in Spanish by Maryknoll missionaries, an experience that brought him in contact with the language and conventions of 'western' Guatemala. Many Indian children are unable to integrate what they are taught at school with what they learn at home. This was not the case with Montejo. A keen pupil, he not only attended classes but went on after graduation to secure teaching certification. Thus accredited, Montejo worked for 10 years as a government employee in the Department of Education, eventually taking up a post as primary schoolmaster in a small village near his home town of Jacaltenango. The events, and the aftermath, of what took place on September 9, 1982 in the village where Montejo taught school are the subject of his compelling tale.

Believing an army detachment moving through village territory to be guerrillas, members of the local civil defence patrol opened fire and wounded one of the soldiers. Upon realizing their error — the guns the soldiers replied with emitted the distinctive "coughing noise of Galil rifles," the standard Israeli-made issue of the Guatemalan army — the civil defence patrol fled to escape retaliation. Chaos ensued as the army attacked the village. Trapped in school, the proximity of gunfire forced Montejo and his class to lie flat on the floor while the enraged army soldiers entered the village. As the shooting died down, Montejo dismissed his traumatized students, who "fled like deer out the door and raced to find [their] parents." He then joined other villagers called upon by the army to assemble in the school patio. There and in the space adjoining the village chapel the army rounded up for public execution members of the civil defence patrol who had been captured and who were accused of being guerrillas. The lean majesty of Montejo's prose only heightens the horrific work of the firing squad:

As the commander prepared to give the fatal order, the condemned turned instinctively for a last look at their loved ones. Their hands were tied behind their back so they could give vent to their feelings only with strained smiles and bitter tears.

"FIRE . . ." The cavernous voice of the commander rang out, and the Galilis exploded with thunderous

fury.

The women raised a deafening howl. Dazed with grief, they tried to fling themselves on the bullet-riddled bodies of their beloved ones, but once again the *kaibiles* forced them to draw back by threatening to shoot them point blank.

The victims slumped and hung from the pillars as the warm, copious blood drenched their shirts.

Attempts by Montejo to reason with the commander had earlier met with no response. After the execution, Montejo's personal situation deteriorated quickly. Under torture, a villager demoted by pain gave Montejo's name as a guerrilla sympathizer, which resulted in the schoolmaster being beaten and led "like a thief or a murderer" back to army headquarters in Jacaltenango, where he was interrogated and subjected to further beating. Insisting always on his innocence, Montejo was finally released from captivity, but only on the condition that he visit army headquarters and report on "every person you think may be involved with the guerrillas." Repugnant though this condition was to him, he accepted it in order to protect himself and his family.

Living dangerously by his wits for weeks on end, Montejo resisted being forced to inform on others until such time as he could flee safely into exile with his wife and children.

One of the most remarkable features of Montejo's story is his ability, as protagonist and writer, not to lapse into indiscriminate hatred. Offered some food by a soldier during his captivity, he reflects: "I thanked God that not every soldier was malevolent and devoid of human feelings. His gesture made me understand that in their own way — although they dare not say so — they too are victims of a violence that has become institutionalized."

Also noteworthy is the clarity with which Montejo observes how terror sows divisions and distrust among the villagers, and ultimately destroys community solidarity. The scorn with which soldiers rebuke his pleas of reason — "you don't fool any of us with your high-sounding jabber" — serves too as a grim reminder of how risky it is to value education in a country where knowledge or the right of self-expression are often considered subversive. Seldom has the tragedy of contemporary Guatemala been told so succinctly yet so effectively as in this fine book. □

W. George Lovell is the author of *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala*, published by McGill-Queen's University Press in 1985. He teaches historical geography at Queen's University.



Indians of Guatemala: Seldom has their tragedy been told so succinctly

A celebration of the bizarre

Farewell Tour
by Virgil Burnett
The Porcupine's Quill, \$7.95

Reviewed by THERESA HURLEY

THIS IS A MOTLEY of literary tidbits: Poe-like settings, Dickensian mystery, Brontë-like metaphor and Shakespearean analogy. Throughout this fine collection of stories, there are allusions to a lusty Boswell, a rotting Havisham, an overdressed Roxanna, Romeo and Juliet, even Hope and Crosby. Each of the seven stories is richly layered with analogies from Elizabethan, Restoration, Gothic and Victorian literature. Virgil Burnett combines the macabre, the melodramatic and the humorous to render the gruesome and perverse funny. Like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Farewell Tours* is a celebration of the bizarre.

Burnett delights in juxtaposing order and chaos, expectation and surprise, normality and abnormality. So one finds neo-classicism contrasting with elements from the Havisham estate or the house of seven gables, as in *Fallowfields*:

The main body of the old mansion was cubical in form, two storeys high, built of ochre brick. It had tall windows, now tightly shuttered against the storm, broad cornices, and a classical portico to protect the front entrance. It was orderly, harmonious, Palladian in inspiration.

Orderly, that is, up to the level of the eaves. The higher reaches of the building seemed to have been conceived by a different architect, or if by the same one, by a different aspect of his nature. The attics were a dark and sinister jumble of slated mansards, oddly set dormers, windows' walks, towers, chimneys, wrought-iron finials. This part of the house was not merely Victorian, it was a phantasmagoria, the architecture of bad dreams.

Such unconventional architecture echoes the unusual settings in which characters are placed: ornate chateaux, dilapidated mansions, mirrored rooms and dark forests. In a sorry manorhouse covered in ivy, there is a vain topos 42-year-old woman rather than the conventional heroine of unrivalled chastity and earnestness. When the reader expects a raven, an enigmatic philosopher or a dark and handsome count, Burnett twists the sinister elements once more.

The characters are as varied as the settings: military personnel, lovers, tourists, septuagenarians and aging playboys. Burnett revels in this multifariousness: nothing fits, not the characters, not the settings. Within these sinister *Wonderlands* where doors are locked and come in assorted sizes, the characters somehow forge ahead, but in the main unsuccessfully.

Burnett revels in literary madness, twisting the *Looking-Glass* overtones and reflecting the Queen of Hearts in one of her more morbid moods. □

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