



A
BEAUTY
THAT
HURTS

Life and Death
in Guatemala

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W. GEORGE LOVELL

SECOND REVISED EDITION

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A BEAUTY THAT HURTS

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*We set out for San Mateo Ixtatán, a ride of about nine leagues. . . . We climbed the side of a long, high ridge, followed it and then . . . came into a shaggy, rugged country of fine, tall pines and uncanny live-oak groves, fog, cold, wheat, sheep, and very Indian-looking Indians. . . . The clouds wove in and out of huge firs. . . . We had a glimpse of Tibet-like houses, then the clouds shut down and the rain began. . . . A tall, black cross came out of nowhere, and we began to descend. On our right, close at hand, the other side of a new valley rose like a wall of emerald-green pastureland seen through a shifting film of cloud. . . . We climbed a hill, just enough to get back into the mist, and entered San Mateo, getting glimpses of roses and shingle-roofed houses. . . . The place was mournful with rain and the constant rush of water. . . . But we felt our health and spirits revive . . . and all that country was so beautiful it hurt.*

OLIVER LA FARGE AND DOUGLAS BYERS,  
*THE YEAR BEARER'S PEOPLE* (1931)



*“The Angel,” used as a poster for the John Sayles film Men With Guns.  
Photograph by Luis González Palma.*

The Linda Schele Series in Maya and Pre-Columbian Studies

This series was made possible through the generosity of William C. Nowlin, Jr.,  
and Bettye H. Nowlin, the National Endowment for the Humanities,  
and various individual donors.

**A BEAUTY THAT HURTS**

*Life and Death in Guatemala*

W. GEORGE LOVELL



UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS

*Austin*

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Printed in the United States of America  
Second revised edition, 2010

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University of Texas Press  
P.O. Box 7819  
Austin, TX 78713-7819  
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Permission to quote from the following works is acknowledged: Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1984); Victor Montejo, *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1987); and Jean-Marie Simon, *Guatemala: Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1987).

Royalties from the sale of this book help support educational opportunities in Guatemala. For further information contact the Maya Educational Foundation, P.O. Box 38, Route 106, South Woodstock, Vermont 05071-0038, [www.mayaedufound.org](http://www.mayaedufound.org).

Cover photograph: Daniel Hernández-Salazar  
Map of Guatemala, p. 2: Jennifer Grek Martin

© The paper used in this book meets the minimum requirements of  
ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997) (Permanence of Paper).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Lovell, W. George (William George), 1951-  
A beauty that hurts : life and death in Guatemala /  
W. George Lovell. — 2nd rev. ed.  
p.      cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-292-72183-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Guatemala—History—1945-1985.    2. Guatemala—History—1985-    3. Mayas—  
Guatemala—Government relations.    4. Indians of Central America—Guatemala—  
Government relations.    5. Human rights—Guatemala.    I. Title.

F1466.5.L68    2010

972.8105'2—dc22

2009033444

*For my mother and my father, who are always with me,  
and in fond memory of María Vilanova de Arbenz (1915–2009)*

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# CONTENTS

PREFACE ix

PART ONE  
**STRUGGLE AND SURVIVAL**

I

- I. Q'ANJOB'AL CANADIAN 3
2. NOBEL K'ICHE' 17
3. JAKALTEK AMERICAN 26
4. DOÑA MAGDALENA 32
5. THROUGH A LENS, DARKLY 39
6. DEVILS AND ANGELS 42

PART TWO  
**BLOOD AND INK**

47

7. THE DELIVERY MAN 49
8. INTO THE FIRE 50
9. PEACE OF THE DEAD 57
10. FUTILITY AT THE POLLS 66

II. CIVILIAN RULE 71

12. A MILITARIZED SOCIETY 75

13. THE DAILY NEWS 80

14. THE FICTION OF DEMOCRACY 90

15. SEARCHING FOR PEACE 94

16. SCARRED BY WAR 98

17. HOW WAS GUATEMALA? 104

PART THREE

**SPANIARDS, LADINOS, AND THE ENDURING MAYA**

105

18. THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE 107

19. THE CENTURY AFTER INDEPENDENCE 120

20. ARBENZ AND THE FRUIT COMPANY 132

21. THE T-SHIRT PARADE 138

22. NATIVES IN THE BACKCOUNTRY 144

EPILOGUE 149

A GUATEMALAN GALLERY FOLLOWS PAGE 180

SOURCES AND COMMENTARY 181

INDEX 203

## PREFACE

The privileges of university life are many. One that I hold in special regard is the luxury of sabbatical leave. Released from routine and duty on one such leave, I was able to devote myself entirely to writing, sitting at my desk without any need to prepare lectures, attend meetings, counsel students, grade papers, examine and supervise theses, evaluate grant proposals, compose letters of recommendation, or simply be at hand to deal with all sorts of matters—and crises, real or imagined. I found peace and quiet in the woods of Vermont, where I dared to think of myself not as teacher or colleague, academic adviser or member of committee, but simply as a writer. The distinction may mean nothing to anyone else, but a Rubicon it was, and remains, for me.

My father saw things differently. When I went home for Christmas the no-nonsense ways of Glasgow were soon asserted. “Yer mother tells me yer on a year’s holiday.” Normally a reliable filter, on this occasion my mother had let me down badly. The words had been uttered half as a statement, half as inquiry, lost on all the occupants of the Old Stag Inn but myself. I wondered, not for the first time, how to respond to my father’s perception of what it is I do, what it is I am.

I began to explain, as my Dean would expect and as best I could, the gulf between “holiday” and “sabbatical,” reeling off a litany of tasks I wished to accomplish before my year’s leave was over. My father listened patiently. When I stopped talking it was time for another round. He wiped from his moustache the creamy froth of a fresh half-pint of Guinness. “Sounds like a holiday tae me, son!” he declared. The woman working behind the bar smiled at the sound of our laughter. Against what did my father measure his son’s lucky lot? The years he spent at sea? After the merchant navy, the years spent running our family shop? After the shop closed, the years of swallowed pride sweeping the streets of Govan? As we made our way home, I felt more privileged than ever.

The flip side of privilege, however, is responsibility: responsibility to oneself, to one's family and friends, to the people and places we cherish and love, to the ideals we hope to live by. While more at ease in a university setting than in any other I have encountered, I have never felt comfortable with certain academic conventions. Among those that trouble me most is the bent that views scholarly work as a kind of cabal, as the ability to engage with a select group of fellow intellectuals in conversation, in print, or in an online forum. Even if I had the inclination to express myself in such a fashion, I doubt if I would derive any pleasure from knowing that whatever I had to say could be understood, and cared about, only by a handful of like-minded specialists. The academy, at times more than I consider tolerable, revels in exclusion.

So it was that, early on in my career as professor, I began to lead a double life, publishing research findings that cater to more erudite tastes while at the same time producing the odd essay, review, or opinion piece for media with more public terms of reference. I enjoy both parts of my double life and have never considered them mutually exclusive. This book is an attempt to link and integrate the two. It is a measure of the freedom that university life allows that, during my sabbatical leave, I could channel energy into a book like this, one that draws on academic training and hopes to have something to offer a specialist clientele, but not at the expense of an interested general readership. It is also, for me, a peculiar measure of what Canada represents that much of the time I spend there is taken up coming to terms with Guatemala, a country I stumbled on almost by accident over three decades ago.

Did I choose Guatemala or did Guatemala choose me? I had been in Canada less than a year, having left Scotland to pursue graduate studies in Latin American geography at the University of Alberta. Classes in anthropology and history, to say nothing of the bite of that first Canadian winter, only fuelled my desire to flee Edmonton and head south. Responding to my supervisor's instructions—"Finish your fieldwork in Mexico and get down to Central America"—I arrived in Guatemala on June 25, 1974, not really knowing what might happen. I was twenty-three, hitching rides or travelling on second-class buses, wide-eyed and ripe for new experience. Within days Guatemala had cast its spell and seduced me, offering not just a fleeting summer's reward but fulfilling work for a lifetime. I had found something I longed for, something I knew would endure. I could feel it in my heart, be part of it as I walked through the hills and the corn, observe it everywhere in the bonds of land and life.

Thereafter, rites of academic passage called for a dissertation, then a monograph, with articles, conference presentations, a teaching job, and graduate supervisions along the way. Soon after being awarded my doctorate, however,

I felt that something was missing, that the contract I had struck with Guatemala called for me to develop the knowledge I had picked up as a scholar, to cultivate a rapport with a non-specialist audience. This occurred in 1981, when the political situation in Guatemala (seldom good) began to deteriorate, when friends whose safety was threatened made plans to leave, when people I knew and respected were killed. Things started to unravel, spun tragically out of control. That year, as civil war flared up, I made my first foray into journalism and began to accept invitations to speak at public meetings in which issues of human rights were addressed.

Guatemala is a complex country. In trying to make sense of it, I make no claims of providing definitive, unassailable interpretations. Evidence can be presented; knowing the full extent of the truth is another matter. “Así es, púes. . . . That’s just how it is,” is a popular Guatemalan way of putting it. For me, it’s an *unjust* way of how things should be. The fallout of the war years will be manifest for decades to come. I heard it put even more obliquely once, after I made what I thought was the most straightforward of inquiries. “Claro no sí hay.” I checked, via eye contact, with the graduate student whom I was visiting in Guatemala City to make sure I had heard correctly. She nodded, mouth open. “Yes, it’s clear that it isn’t” is the best I can approximate.

This book has three parts. In Part One I let Guatemala come into focus through the lives of disparate individuals, several of them indigenous Mayas, whose circumstances differ but whose stories tell of hardship and adversity. These individuals share a common need to bear witness, a belief that abuse and injustice can at least be confronted if not overcome. Some have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities, others not. I have no rule of thumb in this regard besides allowing people to decide for themselves, and feel comfortable about that, before I opt for maximum caution. The main protagonists of Chapters 1 and 4, for instance, expressed a preference to be known by their real names after I had taken the pseudonym route. In the case of Doña Magdalena, her grandson Paulino told me: “My grandmother says that we did nothing wrong and so have nothing to hide. Let people know who we are, tell them what happened to us.” It is the strength and courage of its inhabitants that I find most inspiring about Guatemala.

Part Two offers a series of temporal vignettes that deal with politics and human rights in Guatemala between 1981 and 1995. For this look at the country I lean heavily for information on Guatemalan newspaper sources, because I believe that what appears each day on the printed page, however incongruous, however incomplete, is important and revealing. The period between 1995 and the present is dealt with similarly in the Epilogue.

In Part Three, I step back from journalistic forays to assess the histori-

cal forces that shape, and the cultural context that frames, current predicaments, especially those of Maya communities. I draw here on my familiarity with archival documents and scholarly literature to inject the narrative with contemporary viewpoints and observations. I also indulge in a little playful fieldwork, which I hope lightens the load of more onerous discussion about the vicissitudes of Maya survival. Wherever possible I bring elements of the Guatemalan story back to Canada, where I have lived and worked for more than thirty years. Canadians, as much as Americans, need to know more about life and death in a country that is closer to Toronto than Vancouver is. NAFTA, which is responsible for all sorts of geographical transformations, made Guatemala our next-door neighbor.

As with most projects, this book reflects the help, influence, and encouragement of many people. First mention belongs to my parents, who always stressed the importance of getting an education and who worked hard to afford me opportunities that they themselves never had. In Scotland, at least in the part of Glasgow where I grew up, it was possible then to move through primary and secondary schooling and on to university without being too much of a burden on family resources. This is the greatest gift I was given, and the one I value most. Both my mother and my father lived long enough to see me leave home and make my way in the wider world beyond. Now they are gone, I no longer worry about them worrying about me, but I miss them more than I ever could have imagined.

In Canada, a special vote of thanks belongs to Roger Bainbridge. As editor of Kingston's *Whig-Standard Magazine*, he welcomed my very first submission on Guatemala in 1981. It was Roger who suggested that I write under a pen name, for he grasped right away the nature of my involvement—that I would always want to go back to Guatemala. We settled on Donald McAlpine, a combination of the maiden names of my mother and my grandmother. My *alter ego* was published in the Kingston newspaper several times. He even managed, on a couple of occasions, to migrate from the Saturday magazine to the editorial page, where his views were enshrined, if not endorsed, by the then lively, independent-minded *Whig*. In 1982, after I testified on the armed conflict in Guatemala before a parliamentary committee in Ottawa, at which representatives of the Guatemalan government were also in attendance, Donald McAlpine was made redundant. It also made sense not to return to Guatemala for a while. Roger, however, believed it was his job to keep readers informed as well as entertained, as did the *Whig's* literary editor, Larry Scanlan. From the time of McAlpine on, several times a year, I have

written or spoken about human rights in Guatemala in the hope of making it a concrete issue, not a distant abstraction, for the Kingston community and others across Canada, the United States, and Europe.

In addition to Roger and Larry, other *Whig* associates nudged me along at key junctures, among them Barbara Carey, Amy Friedman, David Prosser, David Pulver, Jennie Punter, and Harvey Schachter. Maureen McCallum Garvie, who first caught my eye when she worked at the *Whig*, is the best editor anyone could hope for, and is now my treasured partner. I thank her for putting up with me, and with my constant comings and goings.

Don Akenson of McGill-Queen's University Press was the first person to tell me that writing a book and getting it published was not beyond me, an early vote of confidence I will always appreciate. A colleague at Queen's University, Brian S. Osborne, listens with an open, supportive mind each time I return angry, sad, or confused from Guatemala. A former Queen's colleague, John Walker, insisted some time ago that I acknowledge and deal with these emotions. Numerous other university associates, at Queen's and elsewhere, I leave unnamed but not unappreciated.

My job allows me the opportunity to talk about Guatemala in the classes I teach. Students pay me the greatest compliment when their curiosity actually takes them there, or elsewhere in Latin America. I have learned a great deal over the years from the graduate students I have supervised or somehow been involved with, in particular Jeff Bellinger, Wayne Burke, David Carr, Peter Cleary, Susan E. Davis, Mireya Folch-Serra, Roberto Garcia Ferreira, Patricia Foxen, Victoria L. Henderson, Sarah Hill, Krista L. House, Leah A. Huff, Wendy Kramer, Aracely Martínez, Karin Monasterios, Erin Morin, Catherine Nolin Hanlon, Kari M. Pries, Jim Reinhart, Finola Shankar, Michelle Switzer, Giselle Valarezo, Paul Van Zant, and Rohini Wilkie. Time spent in their company, on the road and in the field, has been especially rewarding. "The lesson," writes Keith Reid of Procol Harum, "lies in learning, and by teaching I'll be taught." He got that one right, as he has so many other observations about the essence of life.

Over the years my work on Guatemala has been supported by the Office of Research Services at Queen's University, the Killam Program of the Canada Council, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the John Carter Brown Library, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Mary Ellen Davis always responds in her own inimitable way. So do an esteemed assortment of others, among them Armando J. Alfonzo, Wayne Bernhardson, Kathrin and Brian Cooper, Ray Craib, Krystyna Deuss, Mark Fried, Eduardo Galeano, Wayne Grady, Linda Green, Jim Handy, Daniel Hernández-Salazar, John M. Kirk, Christopher H. Lutz, Oscar Maldonado,

María Laura Massolo, Ken Mills, Marilyn Moors, Dougie Munroe, Diane M. Nelson, Michael Polushin, Tom Pow, Alasdair Robertson, Marilyn Simonds, Carolyn Smart, Michael Steinberg, Matthew Taylor, and Ronald Wright. As strategic sources of information, I can always count on Victoria Henderson and Celeste MacKenzie. Conversations in Guatemala with Patrick Ball, Paul Kobrak, Trudy H. Peterson, and Jane E. Swezey got me thinking and made me investigate further. The sisters belonging to Hermanas de la Providencia have been generous not only with their hospitality but also with their quirky sense of humor, a trait necessary for survival in most places, few more so than Guatemala. Earlier drafts of the book profited from the scrutiny of Douglas Fetherling, Michael Shawcross, and Jamie Swift. The copyediting talents of Christopher D. Chung and Robert Clarke worked wonders with structure and organization. Helen Phelan, Sharon Mohammed, and Leah “Mesha” Huff created textual order out of handwritten and digital chaos. Lesley and Bill Taylor encouraged an association with the *Toronto Star*, Carl Neustaedter and Scott Anderson likewise with, respectively, *The Globe and Mail* and the *Ottawa Citizen*. Alastair Reid continues to be model and mentor, and I never pick up an issue of *The New Yorker* without thinking of him. Friends in Seville, among them Antonio Acosta, Alexandra Parma and Noble David Cook, Cristina García Bernal, Juan Gil, Carmen Gómez, José Hernández Palomo, Juan Marchena Fernández, José Manuel Peña Girón, Antonio Reyes del Pulgar, Julián Ruiz Rivera, Pilar Sanchiz, Consuelo Varela, and Elías Zamora, make my sojourns in that marvelous city ever more memorable. Marie Delattre graciously allows her home in Antigua to serve as my base while I am in Guatemala, where I have long enjoyed a rewarding affiliation with the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica.

A book, I have come to appreciate, often assumes a precarious existence upon publication. I am delighted that *Between the Lines*, who first published *A Beauty That Hurts* in 1995, kept faith with it and moved ahead with plans for a subsequent edition, co-published with the University of Texas Press in 2000. This edition is the undertaking of the University of Texas Press alone, where Bill Bishel and Theresa May have been pivotal in keeping titles about Guatemala at the forefront of scholarly attention. I am also pleased that, given reviews of the first two editions, my desire for the book to appeal to both an academic and general readership has apparently been realized.

In devising the present edition I have expanded the Epilogue well into the twenty-first century, with the signing of the peace accord on December 29, 1996, serving as my point of departure. All the chapters that precede it have

been augmented to incorporate new information or to elaborate on what I previously had to say. I have added more than sixty titles to my “Sources and Commentary,” where I evaluate a growing and evolving English-language literature on Guatemala. The photographic appendix, “A Guatemalan Gallery,” has also been expanded. Jennifer Grek Martin redrafted a map of places mentioned in the text and Luis González Palma kindly gave me permission to use his image of *The Angel* (1992) as a frontispiece. The cover photograph of church and parishioners at San Mateo Ixtatán comes courtesy of Daniel Hernández-Salazar.

What follows is a small token for all that Guatemala, and Guatemalans, have given me. It is, however, the payment I am perhaps best suited to make. Words alone will never change Guatemala, but they do afford contemplation of a gnarled, captivating land, as stunning to look at as it is painful to know.

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PART ONE

## **STRUGGLE AND SURVIVAL**



## Q'ANJOB'AL CANADIAN

Genaro Castañeda was only four years old when, in 1974, I first saw the Cuchumatanes Mountains that are home to him and another quarter-million Q'anjob'al Mayas. The life that awaited him in Canada was a long way off, and Spanish still as foreign a tongue as the English he now speaks fluently. His father, murdered at thirty-six, had only two more years to live.

We first became acquainted in 1987. Genaro was working as a busboy at a Kingston restaurant, looking after tables in the summer patio. Someone at the restaurant had mentioned my name and told him about my interest in Guatemala. Genaro knew, for instance, that I had written a book about the experience of his people and neighboring Mayas under Spanish colonial rule. A puzzled expression crossed his face when I said I had spent ten years researching and writing that book. He paused, then asked, "How is it possible to write a book about my people without knowing our language, without speaking Q'anjob'al?"

The question caught me off guard. I mumbled something about how "ethnohistory" and "engaged fieldwork" could elicit "the native's point of view," but I mostly felt the relevance of these notions shrivel in his stare. Whether or not Genaro was enlightened by my response, he didn't say. We became friends. Genaro moved in and shared my house with me. During our time together he told me about his long journey north, about how a Maya from Guatemala came to be in Canada.

Genaro was born and raised in Yulá, a small Cuchumatán village of about two hundred people. Its name in Q'anjob'al translates as "in the water" or "in the place where there is water." Pre-Columbian in origin, Yulá today forms part of a municipal and parish division called Soloma, which is also the name of a