

July 09 - SUMMARY – At the Tomb of the Inflatable Pig

by John Gimlette

This month we welcomed two new members, Cathy and Chad and saw the return of one of our prodigals, Sam to the meeting. Welcome and it was good to see you again.

Kathleen, one of our newer members, led our group of 11 through the politics, infiltration and colonization of one of the two countries in South America that do not have a coastline, Paraguay. Kathleen wrote an excellent summary email to Kurt, our Maryland TLBC member, who had a big interest in this book. I felt that her email to Kurt was so effective that I have included it as the summary of our meeting this week.

From Kurt

The July book was not what I expected just based on the title. I guess I was hoping for a somewhat humorous romp through Paraguay. I had never read anything about the country and that is part of the reason I wanted to read it. Having finished John Gimlette's history, I am not in a hurry to get to Paraguay. I had no idea that Paraguay had be a refuge for war criminals, murderers, land-grabbers, and seekers of fortune, genocidal maniacs and prostitutes, including the fascinating but disappointing Eliza Lynch. She certainly squandered and opportunity to be a "champion of the downtrodden" as Evita Peron was. It appears that she was more like Imelda Marcos and she possibly left behind as many shoes. The later sanctuary for Nazis and the Stronata and genocide against the indigenous races, the war against the allied countries were well covered in this book and were a revelation to me. What a tragic place and it is bizarre how many people tried to exploit the "island"

I feel the need to read more about Paraguay from a tourist standpoint and plan to do so. I must credit the author with his tenacity in getting to as many players in this tragic history as he did and in his searching out the historical sites.

From Kathleen

I'm glad you read the book and thanks for your insight. I facilitated the conversation on this strange, comic-tragic book last night, and the group was unusually silent on it. Maybe they were stunned by the irreverent, cynical writing style of the British author, or by the sheer chaos and tragedy that Paraguay often is. A few of the readers in our group hit on key points about the book and Paraguay that I felt sum them up. When talking about Paraguay, one either cries from the magnitude of tragedy that it has suffered, or observes it with Monty Pythonesque, slightly crazed, dark humor as this author did. Another person in our group observed that it is a country that has one foot in its past and another in the present, keeping itself awkwardly balanced indecisively between the two, unsure if it should move forward or back.

I lived in Paraguay as a Peace Corps volunteer for two and a half years, and I left every six months or so to Argentina or Brazil to reorient and keep in touch with the modern world. Outside of the capital Asuncion, Paraguay is truly like stepping back in time to the Old West where the law is often subjective, people can be ruthless and/or exploited daily, vigilante justice is common, and most Paraguayans struggle to get ahead in a country that frequently doesn't care for their wellbeing. The ruling elite has almost everything and continues to take as much as they can. The majority poor are fighting to get by and remain dignified amid systemic corruption and constant barriers to their success. Few people invest in the country since capital has tended to disappear at scandalous rates; the people have been cowed into submission by centuries of savage violence at the hands of their own leaders and neighboring countries.

The once-democratic, nomadic, egalitarian, healer-nation of the Guarani was almost “genocided” out of existence during the Triple Alliance and Chaco Wars, despite their intermarriage with the Spanish conquistadors centuries earlier.

What the author didn't do in this book is write much about what is good about Paraguayans themselves and what they still manage to do despite all of the crazy foreigners who have descended upon them to exploit them or hide, and the debauchery of their own leaders. Most people are kind, tranquil and wickedly witty, their humor shaped to a steely point by suffering and injustice. They quietly go about their lives feeding, educating and loving their children as most of us do, and try to make an honest living in a corrupt world. Most have to be corrupt at times to survive. They want education, news, technology, capital and 'the good life' like all modern humans do, and the younger generations are becoming increasingly well-educated and informed with the advent of the computer, Internet, cable TV and travels to Argentina and Brazil whenever possible. The young are also tired of the crap their forbearers suffered and want change badly. I think they just might break the back of the ruling party who just lost the presidency for the first time, to a Catholic priest, a first since its inception over a century ago.

Paraguayans love their steamy, tropical, beautiful, fertile 'inland island' and they are reluctant to leap forward into development. They fear losing their Guarani identity, language, customs, herb lore and history in doing so. Homogenization is always a danger in 'modernization', and Paraguayans experienced that when the Spaniards arrived. If you go there, you'll see they incorporated the Spaniards, not the other way around! Guarani is an official language there to this day, which both hurts and helps them maintain who they are (they can't compete on a global scale where Guarani is useless if their kids don't learn Spanish well).

Anyway, that's my two cents on this book. I managed to stay sane and be productive while I lived there by befriending well-adjusted, good Paraguayan people who sat back and watched it all happen with a mixture of humor and sadness, but we all kept going. I also thought the Paraguayans would have been better off if foreigners had left them to develop at their own pace, but isn't that almost always the case? Brazil and Argentina will always keep them down or try to incorporate them into their territories, but the fierce Guarani spirit will always fight to the last man to keep that from happening as they've done before. They are slow to anger, but they are fierce opponents when they reach their tipping point.

If you are ever in that part of the World, visit the Falls of Yguazu, visit the Misiones region, and maybe Villa Rica, their intellectual center. Well worth the trip. I also recommend you watch the movie The Mission with Jeremy Irons and Robert de Niro, excellent counterpoint to this book.

From Jane

I admit, I had not gotten very far into the book, but that really did not matter as Kathleen gave us a much more interesting discussion with her stories about her personal experience of actually living in Paraguay from 2002-2005. During her time in the Peace Corps (PC), most of her fellow volunteers who read the book were less than enthusiastic about it, since the author spent little time on and gave little voice to the majority indigenous people of the country. However, most did think the book accurately captured the ambiance of injustice, corruption, eccentricity, timelessness and mystery that permeate Paraguay. Critics of the book also mused that perhaps Gimlette focused on foreigners in Paraguay to show the things that had been done to Paraguay by 'outsiders'. Kathleen shared other interesting facts - After almost 100 years, the male/female ratio of Paraguayans is finally at 50:50. Due to the wars that killed 2/3 to 9/10 of the country's males (estimates are conflicting) and resulted in genocide, the population ratio was heavily weighted towards women. This propagated chauvinism in Paraguay to an extent by creating a

country of 'little kings' who were tacitly encouraged to have multiple women to repopulate the country. Kathleen also shared how Paraguay is seen as the “Mexico” of South America by their neighbors Brazil and Argentina - it is considered a source of cheap labor. The economic conditions are bad in Paraguay so many Paraguayans go to neighboring countries for work and send money back home.

Currently, approximately 70% of the population in South America is under age 35 (UN population estimate), and Paraguay mirrors this trend. Lots of young people and limited employment = potential unrest. Families with many children are still common as well.

This is the second book in a row by a male British author and their tones could not have been more different. Gimlette wrote from his experiences over 20 years with multiple trips to Paraguay and at times jumped between reminiscences from earlier trips interspersed with new experiences from his more recent trip. This jumping around left some readers in a fog. The main complaint about the book was not about his style of writing which many found clever and witty. The complaint was that he wrote as an outsider and did not give the views of the real Paraguayans.

Thank you Kathleen for leading and for the insights by Sam, Paula, Chad, Cathy, Mimzy, Tia and others for a wonderful discussion.

FUTURE MEETINGS

Below is the list of books for the remainder of the year.

Just a reminder - I order 5 copies of the books to be read and have them at the reserve desk at the Colfax Tattered Cover the month prior to the book discussion.

***Guns, Germs and Steel* by Jared Diamond is on reserve at the Colfax Tattered Cover as of yesterday. The next book, *Into Africa* by Dugard should be available at the August meeting.**

	Book	by	lead by
Aug 10	Guns, Germs and Steel	Diamond	Jane
Sept 14	Into Africa	Dugard	Sharon
Oct 12	The Unheard	Swiller	Willie
Nov 9	Black Wave	Silverwood	Richard
Dec 14	Baghdad Without Map	Horwitz	Susan

UPCOMING TRAVEL RELATED EVENTS

FYI –The movie “**Blindsight**” that Willie recommended in May when we discussed *My Path Leads to Tibet*, is available through the Denver Library System. One copy is found at the Ross UHills Library, the same location as the Budget Treasures Travel Club.

THURSDAY, JULY 23 – 6:00–7:30 PM the Budget Treasurers Travel Club at the Ross UHills Library
www.budgettreasurerstravelclub.com

EVERY TUESDAY - CHANGES IN LATITUDE - in Boulder offer lectures on various travel topics.
www.cil.com

IF YOU COME ACROSS ANY TRAVEL RELATED EVENTS THAT WILL HAPPEN BETWEEN NOW AND THE NEXT MEETING, PLEASE LET ME KNOW AND I WILL FORWARD THEM TO THE GROUP.

Thank you for your continued support and interest.

I look forward to seeing each of you at our next meeting. Until then, travel in safety!

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