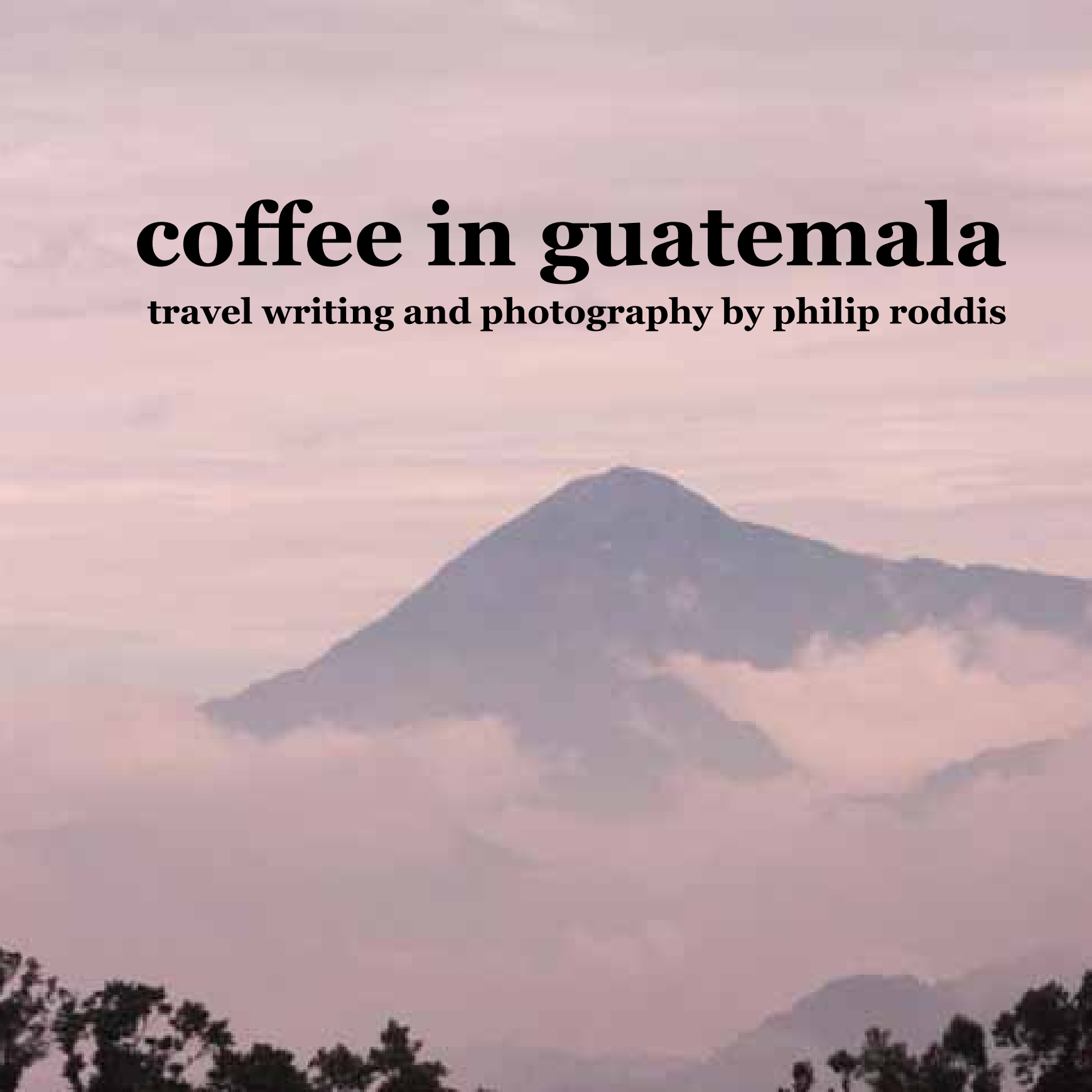


coffee in guatemala

travel writing and photography by philip roddis



Antigua, former Spanish capital of Central America, June 2010. The coffee bar could be in a chic part of Milan. My latte is strong and full flavoured, topped with a leafy calligraphic in foaming milk. Typical Guatemala it ain't. If you care for coffee this country's a degree of torture not seen since the Jesuits switched from delivering it in the here and now to promising it in the hereafter. Beyond the cobbled streets, red tiled roofs and thick, quake resistant walls of the bourgeois villas, expensive cafes and banks with armed guards around Parque Central – and beyond a few oases up country where gringos visit in sufficient numbers to warrant the outlay – when you ask for coffee here you get a warm sugary brew with the smell and taste of weak instant. This in one of the world's premier coffee growing nations, a textbook case of cobblers' kids running barefoot.



A week ago in the hillside town of Coban, founded by Dominican friars in the sixteenth century and developed by German coffee growers in the nineteenth, an elderly senora named Esther, my first English speaker in days, showed me round a *finca* or plantation. Leading me down rows of bushes she rattled off factoids about pests, diseases and the hazards of harvesting. We inspected an acre of beans, washed and raked out in the sun. In outhouses of exquisite aroma we admired state of the art roasting technology. By the time she was through, this severe woman had said as much as a layman like me could be expected to take in. What she hadn't said was a word about the elephant in the room – the labour relations of coffee – and what she'd done was sidestepped, having told me the finca was established in 1871 by a chap named Dieseldorf, my observation that most plantations here seem to be foreign owned, by Germans in particular.

Some 25,000 years ago people entered the Americas from North West Asia, probably using a long gone ice corridor on the Bering Straight though no one who counts will rule out their having rafted the North Pacific. Over the next fifteen millennia, unhampered by green card systems, they fanned out across two new continents chasing woolly mammoth all the way, a pursuit that ended around 10,000 BC when the receding of the last ice age brought the promise of greater returns through cultivation. By then they were leaving archeological evidence of farming and, between 6,000 and 2,000 BC, settling in villages on the intercontinental bridge we now call Central America.

Over the next three millennia the Maya appeared, realised and lost their Golden Age. In the first millennium AD the great city states at Tikal and El Mirador were built and rebuilt then, around the time of the Norman Conquest of England, abandoned due to overpopulation and the collapse of irrigation systems too clever by half. In their heyday they had discovered writing and, as with other civilisations fast-tracked by agriculture, embedded extensive astronomical knowledge in their sacred buildings.

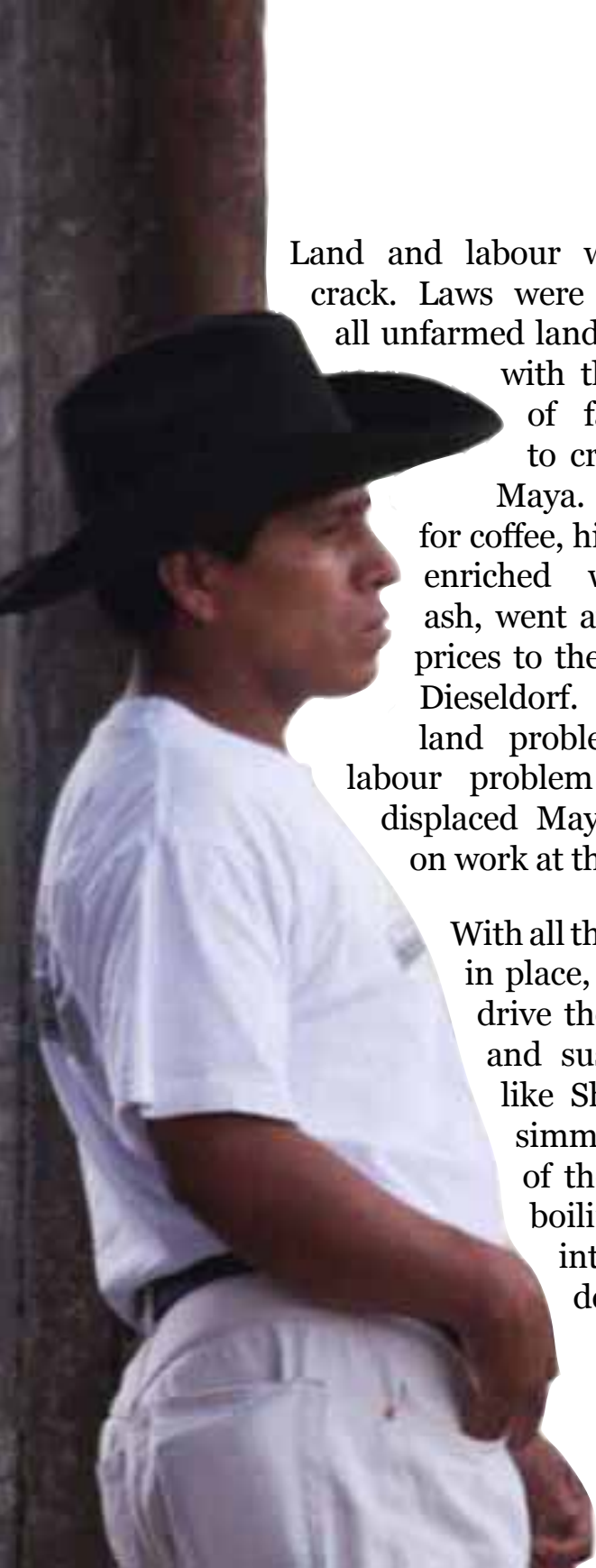


By the twelfth century the Maya were back in villages as subsistence farmers, a surviving aspect of this shift being a proliferation of dialects. From 1300 to the 1500s a few tribes under the sway of powerful Toltecs from Mexico were terrorising their more dovish neighbours, a surviving aspect of *this* being the dominance today of just three dialects: Mam, Q'iche and K'aqchikel. Needless to say these alpha marauders didn't trust one another an inch, enabling the highly organised and gunpowder toting conquistadors to divide and rule where they couldn't be bothered to outfight them.




Guatemala was a disappointment for its new rulers. A Caribbean guide told me the fort she was showing me had once guarded gold bound for Spain from pirates like Drake and Raleigh, given to sailing up the Rio Dulce to snatch it. No doubt she was right but she'd neglected to say it must have been mined elsewhere. There'd been silver, true, but nothing on the scale of the Argentine. Farming had prospered though, as had extraction of indigo, prized until early nineteenth century substitutes took the bottom from the market. That had coincided with a worsening of problems caused by Madrid having imposed on her colonies a rigidly racial hierarchy to keep power and wealth in the hands, not of the conquistadors' descendants, but of those born in Spain. This was a recipe for trouble but instead of the Tea Parties further north, these colonisers won their independence in the aftershocks of Spain's collapse as a great power, courtesy of Napoleon.

The nineteenth century saw a to-and-fro between capitalist liberals on the one hand, feudal conservatives looking to the good old days on the other; one more playing out of class forces that had fired revolution in France and would plunge America into civil war. By late century the liberals had won out just as a stagnant economy looked set to be revitalised by the soaring fortunes of coffee on world commodity markets. Land, labour and capital were needed, with capital the key challenge since the finance mechanisms for production at scale lay undeveloped in this now provincial backwater. The solution lay in enticing European immigration through giveaway land prices and near zero taxation. Land hungry Germans, all the more eager for having missed out on the colonial scramble, were held in particularly high regard. Family and friendship ties saw to it that this early and decisive lead was maintained.

A man wearing a white t-shirt and a black wide-brimmed hat stands in profile, looking towards the right. He is positioned on the left side of the image, with a dark vertical element, possibly a door frame, behind him.

Land and labour were easier nuts to crack. Laws were passed transferring all unfarmed land to the state, with the definition of farming confined to crops alien to the Maya. The best lands for coffee, high altitude soil enriched with volcanic ash, went at rock bottom prices to the likes of Herr Dieseldorf. Solving the land problem solved the labour problem too, with the displaced Maya now dependent on work at the finca.

A man wearing a striped long-sleeved shirt, blue overalls, and a grey cap is carrying a stack of three wooden crates on his head. He is walking towards the right. In the background, a green sign with a tree logo and the word 'PROGR' is visible, along with a sign that says 'DANCE'.

With all the preconditions now in place, tensions that would drive the Cuban Revolution, and sustain Maoist groups like Shining Path in Peru, simmered through the first half of the twentieth century before boiling over in the second half into Central America's murderous civil wars.





In San Pedro I took a boat with my daughter Annie, an NGO worker in Quetzaltenango, capital of the Western Highlands and Guatemala's second city. We crossed volcano-ringed Atitlan, the world's loveliest lake in the view of Aldous Huxley, to Santiago. After paying our respects to an effigy of the chain smoking San Simon – *aka* Maximon (a Maya word for tobacco) *aka* Judas Iscariot (a conquistador shot that backfired) – we visited the handsome church overlooking the harbour. Its noteworthy

features include a statue of Elvis and – a subtlety I'd have missed but for Annie – the merging of alien beliefs in what anthropologists call syncretism. Built by conscripts under the watchful but not always well informed eye of their conquerors, articles of Maya faith like the circular steps from plaza to great arching doors were sneaked into its construction. Most noteworthy of all though is the kingsize banner above lifesize models of the great and good, Mr Presley included, bearing witness to a man of unusual courage.

Father Stanley Rother, an American, was priest to the parish from 1961 to 1981 when he was gunned down by a death squad operating with the blessing of the government and its CIA backers. An ardent defender of his flock – at a time when, in his own words, 'shaking hands with an Indian has become a political act' – he was declared a communist by President Garcia. The denunciation, though patently absurd, was correctly read as Rother's execution warrant.

Rother was one of thousands of priests, journalists, trade unionists, liberals and socialists murdered by or for a client regime whose underwriter's worst nightmare was of Moscow rapping at the back door. When resistance movements, however legitimate their cause or broad-based their support, face a state backed by a superpower and prepared to use every means to maintain the status quo, only two paths are open to them. They can do as some African movements do and meet terror with greater terror – ensuring hell on earth for those, women especially, trapped in the crossfire – or they can give up. Guatemala's rebels gave up. Key to understanding this country is the fact that nothing is resolved. No new deals, no Truth &

Reconciliation Hearings; just insurgency shocked into cessation: silence on the mountain.

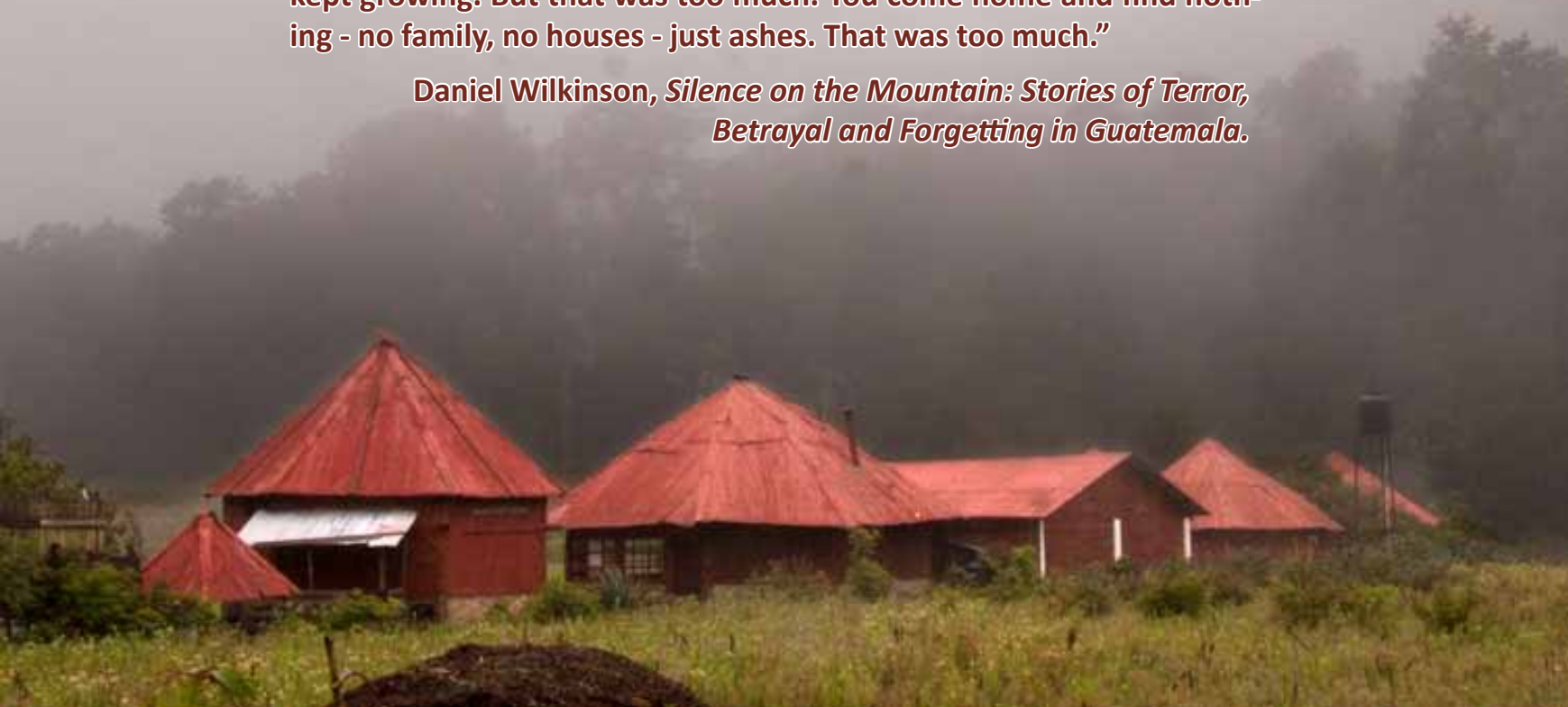
“If the guerrillas had so much support, why didn’t they win?”

“Things change”, Jorge said. “When the army did what it did in Sacuchum, everything changed.”

“Sacuchum Dolores is a community on top of the mountain,” Cesar explained. “Tell him what happened there.”

“The army showed up one day and found the women washing green uniforms. And none of the men were home. So the soldiers had the families go inside their houses. They closed the doors and they set the houses on fire. The women and the children and the old people were inside, and they burned with the houses. That was the new law of the land. If the government hadn’t done that, the guerrillas would have kept growing. But that was too much. You come home and find nothing - no family, no houses - just ashes. That was too much.”

Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal and Forgetting in Guatemala.*



Thirty years after faceless men came for the ‘red priest’, the death squads no longer act with total impunity but no one here thinks for a moment that they are gone. In a country whose recent history has been savage even by Central American standards, taking a stand against injustice and corruption remains a lethal activity; one, moreover, capable of surprising outcomes.

My daughter and a few friends had been relaxing in a bar when a giant of a man, face carved in mahogany, invited himself to their table. A farm owner, a prosperous man, he drank heavily but with self control. In thick staccato Spanish he poured contempt on the ‘red scum who ruined my country’. As he spoke he absent-mindedly fondled the automatic on his hip. While he conceded there had been atrocities on both sides, all his examples were by leftist guerrillas.

Two of the most authoritative inquiries of the nineties, with the worst seemingly over, had credited the guerrillas with fewer than one in ten atrocities; state terror, direct or outsourced, with the rest. In April 1998, two days after publication of one of the reports, author Bishop Juan Gerardi was bludgeoned to death in his garage, one of hundreds of murdered clerics whose faith had brought moral clarity, and the courage to act on it, but had also set in motion the law of unintended consequences. By the time Rome awoke to the dangers and declared liberation theology a heresy, the CIA had already identified it as a threat of the highest magnitude. Cue for, alongside the assassinations, a wave of right-wing evangelism from the north. Its pockets were deep, its temperance message music to the ears of women sick of alcohol diverting already low incomes and fuelling domestic

violence. Add in guilt-free contraception and an aspect of Guatemala surprising to visitors – that this once prime Vatican turf is now forty percent Protestant – begins to make sense. A mix of poverty, gender oppression, violence and papal intransigence saw missionaries from America’s bible belt pushing at an open door.

Back in our chic Antigua bar, retiree Dave – slacks, pressed shirt and teamster cap – sips his Americano. Born in Malaya to British parents in the forces he was raised in Kuala Lumpur, Belfast and Sussex before emigrating as a young man



to Canada and a lifetime of forklift truck driving. ‘Life’s been good’, he tells me in his soft North American drawl. ‘Steady work .. health scheme .. pension good enough to vacation here every year. It helps of course when you belong’ — he taps his cap proudly — ‘to the biggest union in the world.’

Dave is that rare thing, a good talker who can also listen. Our previous conversations have been wide-ranging: from Asia to England’s predictably dull showing in the world cup; from top tactics for learning Spanish to the virtues of grapeseed extract in removing imodium from the traveler’s packing list. Today he jabs an angry finger at his newspaper: ‘This country is unbelievably corrupt!’ A police chief — to my surprise a woman — has fled the country, wanted allegedly for organising death squads. Criminal, Dave thinks, not political. ‘Here you can have an entire family taken out for five hundred bucks, no problem.’ He mimes the spray of machine-gun fire but there’s nothing childish in the gesture.

He translates a story on the facing page. The search is on for a successor to the head of a UN team investigating mass graves in the countryside. The last one resigned in the face of death threats. ‘Here you take those *very* seriously. Ninety-six percent of all murders are never solved.’ Women are especially vulnerable, it seems, machine-gunned or macheted on busy streets in broad daylight for reasons unfathomable. A rationalist, I seek motives however perverse but Dave is not so sure. ‘A lot of people tell you it has to be drugs’, he begins.

(Guatemala is now a transit country for northbound cocaine. As well as the regular machinery for routing them into America, opportunist markets on both coasts meet the growing domestic demand for the shrink-wrapped

packages that bob ashore when boats jettison cargo in the face of stop-and-search vessels. The USA recently decertified Guatemala as a ‘friendly nation’ in its so-called war on drugs.)

‘... but it needn’t be drugs at all. It can be anything or nothing. And this country *despises* women.’



I haven't even begun to look at that, though Annie is scathing of the attitudes to women of Latin American men. But I know this much: when wars stop, people don't suddenly forget how to kill. In the UK of the late forties and fifties, use of the death penalty had become less frequent, with a narrowing subset of murders now designated capital. But one thing that would still send you to the gallows, as Derek Bentley and Ruth Ellis found to their cost, was killing with a firearm. At the end of the war the British State, unable to gather back all its weapons and faced with black markets awash with cheap shooters, was sending a clear message.

Civil war is especially barbarous, with weapons by definition uncontrolled. To this we can add the porous border factor; witness the ruled lines denoting arbitrary cartographic allocations of jungle in Northern Guatemala, Western Belize and South-East Mexico. Then there's the tendency of nations founded on the slaughter of indigenous peoples to be fiercely protective of their constitutional right to bear arms. But one card trumps all others in fuelling Guatemala's lawlessness, including what I think of as its rational irrationality; random killings by teenage boys who must murder someone – *anyone* – to gain acceptance by a gang and thereby a modicum of material security.

The decisive factor, also shedding light on what that police chief may have been up to before she fled, is Small Government taken to the limit.

Small Government was very much in evidence when, a week before my arrival, Storm Agatha swept in from the South East Pacific to lash Guatemala with six days of torrential rain whose mudslides left one hundred and ninety dead. That's official. The real toll was far higher since countless

Maya never *officially* existed. Elspeth, a German I met in Quetzaltenango, had been in the mountains to learn a Maya dialect when Agatha struck. She and a dozen others, gringo and Maya, had sat it out in a hut while rain of an intensity unsustainable for more than a few minutes in the UK drummed insanity-inducing rhythms on a corrugated iron roof. When they finally eased off, Elspeth's boyfriend had joined the impromptu team which in that region alone retrieved over eighty bodies from the slurry.

At 3,000 metres in the Western Highlands, where tree-felling, unlicensed and uncontrolled, had done much to worsen Agatha's destructive force, I stood amid the remains of huts - mud bricks half dissolved like sugar cubes in coffee dregs - to speak through an interpreter to families who'd lost everything. They gave stoic, *shit-happens* shrugs.



In the wrecked turbine shed of a micro power station a young South African engineer from Annie's NGO, which had overseen its installation, told of a losing battle against climate change and gung-ho deforestation. There were tales too of co-op, church and union workers pulling out all the stops to offset the misery wreaked on their fellows. Each had their own take on the interventions, earthly or divine, now required but one thread ran through every narrative: the utter uselessness of a government that has shown the world its ability, with a little help from its friends, to crush armed and political challenge but has no answer to those of poverty, the natural calamities this part of the world is prone to, or the aspirations of its people. 'You know what?' said Marylander Steve, field leader of the same NGO, as we photographed half a mile of water pipe crushed or burst at a dozen points. 'I'd like those senators back home, the ones who insist we need smaller government, to come to Guatemala and see close up what smaller government actually looks like.'

Built in the first few centuries AD the pyramids, temples and civic buildings of Tikal, zenith of Maya achievement, are a staggering must-see, easily comparable to the Pyramids at Giza or the Khmer splendour of Angkor Wat. I climbed wooden stairs not for the vertiginous to the dizzying heights of Temple 5. It has no safety rail. With camera, lens filters and tripod I inched along a ledge offering breathtaking views of jungle stretching past the notional Belizean border to the eastern horizon. Within a three mile radius of Temple 5, Maya ruins on an equally stupendous scale punch through the tree canopy to shake dark angry fists at a usurper sky-god with much to answer for.

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Also on Temple 5 that day was an Oklahoman married to an official at the US Embassy in Guatemala City. He asked about my photography and was happy to speak of life in one of the world's most dangerous places, war zones excepted. Embassy staff and their families follow strict rules, he told me, as to which sectors they may and may not enter. In the event of robbery they surrender all valuables immediately. 'You do whatever they say. You only resist if they try to get you into a car. In GC that is not a kidnapping. It means they're going to kill you.'

But the main reason gringos get killed, he said, is misunderstanding. 'They're too slow to respond and the robber panics.' Like Dave in the chic coffee bar he mimed the firing of a gun, but this was a single shot. To the head I guess. So now I've one more reason for not returning to this country until I've learned some Spanish.

My last day in Antigua. I blow on the creamy surface of a second latte, careful not to disturb the calligraphy. In two hours a bus will take me to GC for my flight to Miami en route to Heathrow. I know a bit more about coffee, a lot more about the human condition. I know why open-air prayer meetings are a hit with the senoras, why German names dominate the coffee trade and why small boys scan the rip-tides of lonely beaches. I know I don't care for small government, with young toughs out to make their bones and cops so brutalised and badly paid they moonlight as hired assassins. I've learned much but a few questions still niggle. Was it Jailhouse Rock or his later output that saw Elvis beatified? How does



it feel to drive old US buses down two thousand miles of Pan American Highway, and who then applies the Daliesque paint jobs for their new lives as Guatemala's infamous chicken buses? And why, oh why, is it so hard to get a decent cup of coffee here?



On that last, the obvious answer – that Guatemalans just don't *get* this bitter brew that brought such heartache while remaining out of reach for most of them – does not bear close scrutiny. In Vietnam, impoverished by thirty years of war and another twenty of austerity thanks both to the command economy and America's vindictive policy of punishing nations friendly to Hanoi, good coffee is nevertheless enjoyed by the masses. In India, no big exporter but still a producer of fine beans, it isn't, but I put that down to the idea, widespread even now, that *made in India = inferior*. Order a coffee there and the waiter is likely to reassure you that 'it is only the finest Nescafe which we are using, sahib'.

The irony of bad coffee in Guatemala of all places has bugged me since my arrival but my gripe now seems at once churlish and effete. One day some neohippie entrepreneur, fired by the challenge of selling ice to Eskimos, may come to wow the nation with its own product. Or perhaps the task will fall to Starbucks, known to smile on low tax economies. For the time being though, this beautiful but troubled country has more pressing matters to resolve. I push back my chair, drop a coin on the table and leave.

