NO SPAIN, NO GAIN


It's nice to be flavour of the year—and Spain and Spaniards are certainly that in 1992. What with the Barcelona Olympics, Seville's Expo, Madrid's status as the cultural capital of Europe, and the stomp-on part that the Spanish-Australian family get as the featured ethnics in Strictly Ballroom, it's enough to turn a muchacho's head. Add to this the attention that Latin America is receiving in the media at the moment as a result of Columbus Week—even on the flickering screen, where none other than Gerry Depardieu is strutting his stuff (and his nose) as Cristóbal Colón—and there's a real argument for 1992 being named the year of HO (Hispanic Overdose).

On the publishing front, there has been a plethora of books on Barcelona already this year (the best one being the magisterial survey of that city's history and art by Robert Hughes); a number of biographies of Columbus have appeared (Felipe Fernández-Armesto, who sounds disarmingly like Peter Sellers doing Prince Charles doing Gryphynpe Thynne, was interviewed about his Columbus book recently by Jill Kitson on ABC radio's The Book Report); and there's Inga Clendinnen's brilliant book on the Aztecs.

This frenzy of cultural hyping has been patchy in quality. Television in particular has a tendency to flatten the contradictions and complexities of cultural history into a parade of seamless cliches and visual stereotypes.

The Buried Mirror by the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes embodies much of what is both good and bad in this slick commodification of culture and history. It is the book of the five-part television series of the same name which was recently run on ABC-TV and its sumptuous design, glossy paper, wide margins and 160 illustrations (many in full colour) are a testament to the high production values of the publisher. The text itself is also quite laudable in its accessibility and flow.

I thought Hughes had taken on a Herculean challenge and was sometimes over-ambitious with his 2000 year history of Barcelona, but Fuentes outdoes him in terms of sheer scope. Fuentes' book actually begins with the Paleolithic cave paintings of Altamira in Spain, and with the crossing of the Bering Strait into America by Asian mammoth hunters 48,000 years ago. He doesn't dwell too long on these Ice Age wastes, but he does take us right through to post-Franco Spain and to the graffiti-painted tenement wastes of contemporary East Los Angeles and the looming reality of 'Hispanic USA'. (It is estimated that, by the middle of the next century, half of the population of the USA will be Spanish speakers.)

The quincentenary of the encounter between Columbus and the New World is obviously a political minefield. I expected Fuentes to be much more corrosive about the Spanish invasion of America and the subsequent obliteration of many of its native cultures. But, without ever being an apologist for genocide or ethnocide, Fuentes is surprisingly celebratory about the coming of the Spaniards. As against the usual stereotype of the Spanish as genetically predisposed to siestas, corruption and military dictatorships, Fuentes chooses to emphasise the little-mentioned democratic tradition in Spain:

In fact, the first European parliaments that took hold and incorporated the third estate, the commons, all appeared in Spain...In 1188, the first Spanish parliament was convoked by King Alfonso IX of León, preceding all other European parliaments by at least half a century, while the first Catalanian Cortes, in 1217, and those of Castile, early in the thirteenth century, preceded the first English parliament, in 1265.

When writing about Spain's siglo de oro or Golden Age—the 16th and early 17th centuries—Fuentes stresses that, despite its proverbial reputation, even then, for "unpunctuality, sloth, aristocratic self-indulgence, and innate corruption", Spain was "perhaps the most energetic nation of the post-Renaissance world". Later, in relating how Napoleon ousted the reactionary Spanish despot Ferdinand VII and installed his own brother as King of Spain, Fuentes enthusiastically tells the story of how the Spanish, given the opportunity to embrace the French revolutionaries as 'liberators', answered instead "Long live our chains"—and were mown down by French firing squads.

Fuentes' strategy is clear: he is trying to claim for Latin America a continuity with this democratic and heroic strain of Spanish history. The revolutionary heroes of Latin America (Zapata, Villa, Juárez, Bolívar, Sarmiento, San Martín, and so on) are portrayed not so much as extraordinary men but as products of the ordinary experience of the people. And their aspirations for self-government and an equitable division of wealth are presented as the recurrent (and constantly frustrated) surfacing of a common desire for democratic ideals.

Fuentes draws an analogy between the decadence and eventual collapse of the once-mighty Spanish empire and the inexorable slide in the same direction of present-day US and its (military, industrial, economic) empire. Such analogies, however, are
rhetorically showy but of limited usefulness. And when Fuentes claims that Latin America, having rejected both capitalism and Marxism, is in the process of developing its own home-grown political structures, I started wishing he had stuck to writing novels.

Spanish and Latin American history, as told by Fuentes, is a tragedy of great potential stifled and cut short by accidents, bloody-mindedness and missed opportunities. In fact, the best parts of The Buried Mirror are those sections where Fuentes subsumes his historical narrative within the tragic: extreme and often absurd personal narratives of historical figures like Cortés and Columbus, Santa Anna and Jovellanos, or regular and extensive asides about Hispanic writers and artists like Cervantes, Calderon, Velázquez, Goya, Posada and Orozco. His opinions on their lives and art are fairly commonplace but at least Fuentes brings to these sections the immediacy which is the domain of a novelist.

The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano's Memory of Fire trilogy is a stunning history of the encounter between Spain and Latin America which foregrounds the importance of personal experience within History by chronologically deploying hundreds of self-contained mini-stories. Building up over about 900 pages, these individual narratives combine operatically into a kind of mosaic of voices and incidents which is satisfying both as history and literature. Fuentes in The Buried Mirror does not approach the power and directness of Galeano's method, but I kept reminding myself that this book is, after all, the book of the TV series and, as such, is better than your average travelogue.

The Buried Mirror is a lively introduction to the intertwined histories of Spain and Latin America, and its extensive bibliography is a good place to start further reading. What worries me is that in 1993, when it's Albania's or Bhutan's turn to be flavour of the year, then Fuentes' book may be the place where the 'average reader' (who can afford $59.95) has actually stopped.

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SHORT CHANGED


Susanna Short's biography of her father, Laurie Short, former General Secretary of the old Federated Iron Workers Association (now the Federation of Industrial Manufacturing and Engineering Employees) is a wonderful example of history being written by the victors. This is not to denigrate the author's work—despite the familial relationship she has managed to write a reasonably critical political life of Short. While we get little flavour of her own relationship with her father, there are small hints along the way, such as her frequent references to his height (or lack of it) and the effect it had on his behaviour. She also notes the fact that Laurie would go to the FIA office even on the weekend just to read the newspapers. While Laurie Short is certainly no Daddie Dearnest, we shouldn't be surprised that Susanna followed in the footsteps of her mother, Nancy Borlase, as art critic and artist like Cervantes, Calderon, Velázquez, Goya, Posada and Orozco. His opinions on their lives and art are fairly commonplace but at least Fuentes brings to these sections the immediacy which is the domain of a novelist.

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When I attended the funeral of Short's long-time FIA assistant secretary Harry Hurrell at a large Catholic Church in Sydney in the late 80s, I and the rest of the congregation were harangued by an elderly Grouper during what should have been a panegyric to Hurrell. At that point it was nearly 40 years since Mr Justice Dunphy of the old Arbitration Court had effectively replaced Ernie Thornton with Laurie Short as FIA secretary after a spectacular ballot-ripping inquiry which marked the end of communist domination of Australian trade unions. The eulogist spoke as if it had all happened last week. Susanna Short has been able to convey something of the almost Shakespearean drama which was the fuel for control of the Australian trade union movement at the start of the Cold War. It was to determine the nature of Labor and union politics to this day.

Laurie Short was born in 1915 into a 'respectable' working class family of Protestant Irish ancestry. With that kind of background Short must, at times, have felt uncomfortable in later life working inside the ALP-sanctioned Industrial Groups with the predominantly Catholic members of Santamaria's 'Movement'. As a teenager Laurie moved away from the influence of his father, an avid Lang supporter, into the world of the Unemployed Workers Movement and the Young Communist League (from which, ironically, he was expelled in November 1932 for challenging the expulsion one month earlier of Ernie Thornton). Disillusioned by the Stalinist excesses of the local Communist Party he immersed himself in American Trotskyist literature and, in May 1933, was among those who formed the Workers' Party of Australia (Left Opposition) with people like Professor John Anderson of Sydney University. The history of that party reads like the script of The Life of Brian (remember the titanic struggles between the People's Front of Judaea and the Judaean People's Front?). During the course of his Trotskyist activities he met John Kerr (who, with Jim McClelland, would form part of his legal team to ultimately defeat Thornton), Jack Sponberg (sometimes...