

The Palace of Justice

A Colombian Tragedy

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Foreword

The Palace of Justice is an enthralling narrative, poignant and surrealistic at the same time. Ana Carrigan is clearly herself haunted by the events she has been impelled to reconstruct with such meticulous care and in riveting prose. She is herself Colombian, on her mother's side, and the love she felt for the country of her childhood underlies the horror inspired in her by the events in and around the Palace of Justice in November 1985, and the political and juridical sequels to those events.

Corruption is present, in varying degrees and at various levels, in all governments, but in Colombia it has attained the proportions of an eerie epic which is unable to stop. It is not mainly financial corruption, though that is abundantly present. It is mainly the corruption of hypocrisy; the facade of democratic institutions masking the reality of arbitrary and brutal military power. The events of November 1985, destroyed the credibility of that facade, but the facade itself has been assiduously preserved with a neurotic and pedantic punctilio.

As Ana Carrigan says, Colombia is not a military dictatorship. Things there might be marginally better if it were. Under a military dictatorship, the generals have to take responsibility for failures, as the Galtieri junta had to do in Argentina. But in a pseudo-democracy, like Colombia, the military have power without responsibility, which is just how they like it. At the time of the massacre in the Palace of Justice, and habitually, the military leadership depicted itself, and was described by the admiring media

and politicians, as the defenders of democracy. And they are indeed the designated defenders of the particular version of democracy they defend with such ferocity.

The Palace of Justice is a chilling but fascinating exploration of the realities that underlie the copious rhetoric of a pseudo-democracy. This book will always haunt the imagination of all who read it.

—Conor Cruise O'Brien

Prologue

BOGOTÁ, TUESDAY, APRIL 9, 1991. My first evening back in Bogotá after five years. That particular fragrance in the air: A mix of eucalyptus trees and the red earth of the Andes in the thin mountain air. Unmistakeable. Put me down blindfolded and with my ears plugged and I will tell you within five seconds where I am. I have known this unique fragrance of Bogotá since I was a small child. Breathing it in now takes me back, not five years to my last visit, but all the way back to that first childhood encounter with my mother's country.

The pavements then were cleaner, and also a lot safer. The Indian women arrived in the morning with their donkeys heaped with fruit and vegetables and parked themselves in the shade to sell their produce. "AGUACAATE! PAPAS FRESCAS! FRIJOLES..." If I shut my eyes I can still hear the cadences of their high-pitched cries, calling out to the cooks along the street outside my aunt's house. On that morning long ago, my first ever in a tropical, Latin country, they woke me up. The first thing I saw when I jumped out of bed and ran to the window was the Indian woman, with her long, black, thick and shiny plait under her felt hat, and her small grey donkey padding ahead of her up the street. I thought that I was truly in a land of magic. Never had I seen a sky so blue, or mountain peaks towering so close, so high above me, and the red and purple of the bougainvillia blossoms in my aunt's garden were of a deeper richer hue than I had ever known existed. Then, that night, musicians came to serenade my mother under her window,

welcoming her home to the town she had left so many years ago to marry my father. Tradition forbade us to put on the light or to look out. Under cover of darkness the fiction of the anonymity of her admirers had to be strictly maintained. Crouched beneath the open window we could hear the serenaders rustling and whispering in the dark before the first rhythmic notes of the guitars sounded, followed by male voices rising in passionate lamentations to broken hearts, lost loves, rejected dreams. Those male voices in the Bogotá night, those liquid guitars, brought another culture, another world of romance and mystery to my childhood.

Was it ever like that? I thought so.

Were the Indian women who spread their ample forms under the eucalyptus trees beside their vibrant loads of oranges and limes, melons and chirimoyas, happier and more prosperous than the gaunt figures who drag their donkeys through the Bogotá traffic today, going from restaurant to restaurant collecting yesterday's left-overs and shovelling them into buckets harnessed to their donkeys' backs? I think they were.

People tell me that the women are collecting garbage for the pigs that they keep in their shacks which cling to the mountain's side, just across the new super highway that circles the city from north to south, separating the penthouses of the latest skyscrapers from the mountain's shantytown. I fear the pigs are a fiction. Every time I drive along the highway I look out for them but I have yet to see one.

Yet it is not, of course, the physical landscape of my childhood alone that has changed. In recent times the international perception of Colombia reflects the image of a country and a society that has run amok. A place of drug barons and guerrillas where violence has become an accepted way of life, and a rich, sophisticated and resourceful country of almost 30 million people seems condemned to stagger convulsively from one trauma to the next. In 1985, I happened to be in Bogotá to witness one such convulsion, a tragedy whose legacy has affected every facet of political life in Colombia ever since. On a November morning of that year, thirty-five heavily armed guerrillas of the M-19 Revolutionary Movement invaded the Palace of Justice in the heart of Bogotá's historic Plaza

Bolívar, and the government of the day stood aside as the Colombian Army responded with an all out military assault involving tanks, armored cars and over two thousand troops. When the guerrillas attacked, there were over three hundred people within the great building that was home to the Colombian Supreme Court and the Council of State, including the hierarchy of the Colombian judiciary and their staff, among whom the guerrillas seized over one hundred hostages. The combat between the army and the guerrillas lasted, almost without a break, for twenty-seven straight hours. When it ended, at 2:30 pm on the following afternoon, over one hundred people, including eleven Supreme Court Justices, lay dead. One army lieutenant and eight policemen—many killed by the army's own "friendly fire"—had also died. An unknown number of people had "disappeared." And the interior of the Palace of Justice had been reduced to rubble by explosives and fire. When it ended, in time-honored fashion, the "official version" of these events was hurriedly assembled and rushed to press.

In the process of rewriting the history of those November days, it was of course necessary to weave multiple disguises around the real events, as they had occurred in real time, in one physical location in the heart of the nation's capital, with real bodies and missing people, real eyewitness survivors, and that left behind the incinerated remains of a once great building. The fact that throughout the two days that the battle lasted, these real events had all taken place under the glare of the television lights and the cameras, created a special challenge to the scriptwriters of the official scenario. Nevertheless, as history shows, it was a challenge they were well equipped to handle. Today many aspects of the official version, in particular the central one about the core involvement of the drug mafia, have survived virtually intact.

It is rare that a single event can illuminate an entire epoch. Yet the tragedy at the Palace of Justice provided a microcosm in which the three mythic figures of every Latin conflict of the last fifty years—the Rebel, the General, and the President—acted out their appointed roles without benefit of the usual, self-protective, camouflage. In the years since, from beneath the palimpsest of inven-