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David E. Whisnant. *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places: The Politics of Culture in Nicaragua.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. xiii + 569 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4523-3; $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2209-8.

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David E. Whisnant examines Nicaragua's long history of culture wars in his remarkable book *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places: The Politics of Culture in Nicaragua.* The scope of the book is expansive. Whisnant examines the Spanish invasion and the concomitant attempt to destroy indigenous society and Nicaragua's subsequent integration into the North Atlantic world in the nineteenth century (with emphasis on its relationship to the United States). The primary focus of the book, however, is on the cultural politics of the Somoza family dictatorship and the Sandinista Revolution. Whisnant explores the "links between culture and power," recognizing not only the power of official cultural policies to legitimize regimes, but also the potential use of culture by resistance groups (p. 4).

The clash of cultures in Nicaragua began with the Spanish invasion and the effort by the conquistadors to impose Hispanic cultural values on native Americans. The power of the sword and the demographic collapse accelerated by disease aided the new arrivals in dramatically transforming culture in Nicaragua and laying down the foundations of a new Nicaraguan culture that has proven remarkably resilient. The Spanish imposed their language, god, foods, land tenure systems, gender order, town organization, and architecture, among other cultural traits. Despite the Spanish advance, Nicaragua's indigenous people managed to retain remnants of their culture. This was especially true on the Atlantic Coast, where the Spanish presence was minimal.

Following independence, Nicaragua's elite patterned their cultural norms on North American and European models. The elite disdained both indigenous and traditional (campesino) culture. The elite sought to import not only fair-skinned Europeans to whiten the population of the country, but the clothing, education, political ideologies, music, cuisine, and other cultural forms and values of Europe and North America as well. The massive extent of U.S. military, political, and economic intervention in Nicaragua during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries guaranteed a high degree of U.S. cultural influence that reached its peak under the Somoza dynasty. The British and North American presence on the Atlantic Coast (in the case of Britain, dating to the colonial era) was especially profound. Moravian missionaries and North American entrepreneurs left their cultural marks and further divided the Atlantic Coast from the rest of Nicaragua.

Whisnant describes Anastasio Somoza Garcia as a man who, "although a crude, venal, and supremely greedy man, had an intuitive grasp of the nuances of culture and of their potential political uses" (p. 110). Although he had a preference for boxing, race cars, and U.S. war movies, Somoza knew that even a token acknowledgment of cultural icons and events could win political points, whether geared toward the elite or peasants. His attention to cultural matters was, however, superficial. The government maintained minuscule budgets for cultural affairs and Whisnant condemns Somoza for turning "[a] richly textured cultural landscape into a barren and arid wasteland" (p. 107). Somoza also realized that control over the media could solidify his regime. A case in point was his early recognition of the power of radio. The first radio station in Nicaragua began broadcasting in 1925. In 1936, Somoza merged the National Guard's radio station with that of private stations to form "Radio GN y Nacional." Censorship muted opposition voices not only on the radio, but on television and in the print media as well.

United States entertainment programs and advertising dominated the mass media and carried North American culture and values into the country. Radio programming included the music of Bing Crosby and Tommy Dorsey as well as shows like "Amos 'n Andy." Such U.S. productions as "The Flintstones," "Father Knows Best", "Leave It to Beaver," "Peyton Place," "Perry Mason," "Bonanza," and "Wild, Wild West," among other offerings, accounted for 80 percent of Nicaraguan television broad-

casts by 1965 (p. 115). North America's Felix the Cat, Buck Rogers, the Katzenjammer Kids, Superman, and a host of Walt Disney characters even dominated the funny pages. This U.S. influence was not merely the result of commercial forces, but had the backing of the United States government through the Office for the Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations between the American Republics (created by the Franklin Roosevelt administration in 1940) and its successor, the Office of the Coordinator for Inter-American Affairs.

Opposition to the Somoza regime included cultural expressions of discontent. Whisnant highlights several culturally based movements that attacked the regime and the dominance of Yankee cultural influences and that sought to revive traditional Nicaraguan culture. Among these was the *nueva cancion* movement of protest music, also known in Nicaragua as "volcanto"–a cross between the words "volcano" and "canto" (song). This protest movement was not unique to Nicaragua, but began in Chile in the mid-1960s and spread to the rest of Latin America. Whisnant explains that the new song artists "drew upon traditional musical forms and rhythms and employed indigenous instruments to create songs oriented toward progressive political and social change" (p. 174). Literary figures also had their place in the opposition. The Vanguardia movement of the 1930s was not anti-Somoza, but its members did seek to strengthen Nicaraguan traditional culture to counter the rising cultural influences from the North. The writers of the Generation of 1940 attacked the Somoza regime and the prevailing elite cultural norms. It should not be forgotten that it was a university student and poet, Rigoberto Lopez Perez, who shot and killed Somoza in 1957. The most famous member of the Generation of 1940 was Ernesto Cardenal, author of the poem *La hora zero* and architect of the Solentiname community, a group of artists and writers who experimented with primitive painting, poetry workshops, and revolutionary consciousness raising. The cultural forms that occupied the members of the Solentiname community formed, in Whisnant's words, "much of the foundation for Sandinista cultural policy" that emerged after the revolution of 1979 (p. 186).

The Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) had called for a revolution in culture as early as 1969, and its leaders went to great lengths to carry that revolution out after they came to power in July 1979. Indeed, the Ministry of Culture came into being the day after the triumphant Sandinistas entered Managua. The Ministry, headed by Ernesto Cardenal, sought to promote a true popular culture through the plastic arts, dance, film, poetry, and even puppet shows. This revolutionary transformation included the elimination of the vestiges of the old elite and U.S. cultural influences. Examples of the government's work include its creation of the Instituto Nicaraguense de Cine (INCINE) and the Sistema Sandinista de Television (SSTV) to replace foreign films and television programming with Nicaraguan productions that would advance the cause of the national revolution.

The Sandinista cultural program encountered numerous difficulties. One problem involved financing. The budget of the Ministry of Culture, never large to begin with, suffered repeated cuts due to the military demands of the contra war (the FSLN eliminated the Ministry altogether in 1988 and parceled its duties out to other organizations). INCINE was never able to produce enough material to displace foreign films, which continued to dominate Nicaraguan movie houses. (INCINE dumped much of its budget into the film "Walker," a critical failure.) A more serious problem was resistance to official cultural policies. As Whisnant put it, "not all 'Nicaraguan eyes' saw culture in the same way" (p. 235). Conflicts resulted from the contradictory policies of the FSLN to democratize culture on the one hand, but to use culture as a tool for promoting the revolution on the other. Divisions over revolutionary goals and artistic freedom pitted the Ministry of Culture against the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers (ASTC), but also created tensions within the ASTC itself. Rosario Murillo, the wife of President Daniel Ortega and director of ASTC, claimed that "the first duty of every revolutionary is to make the revolution" (p. 240). What would happen if artistic sensibilities were at odds with the government's political goals? This tension is evident in a statement issued by the Sandinista Youth Movement regarding its rock and roll, jazz, and pop music festival: "Imperialism is one thing, but the music of Diana Ross is another. Cultural penetration is one thing, but Louis Armstrong, Janice [sic] Joplin and Chick Corea are another" (p. 242). The conflict reached its greatest intensity in the poetry workshops (*talleres de poesia*), the pet project of culture minister Ernesto Cardenal. While the poetry workshops invited all interested parties and all forms of expression, there was a determined effort to teach participants what organizers considered a correct technique as well as stressing revolutionary content and the FSLN party line.

The most disastrous of the cultural clashes that took place during the Sandinista Revolution occurred on the Atlantic Coast. In part, this conflict was the result of deliberate and shortsighted Sandinista provocations. The FSLN attacked the Moravian church, coerced locals to affiliate with Sandinista mass organizations, and introduced new Spanish-speaking mestizo officials in order

to enhance the regime's control over the region. Yet as Whisnant points out, the Sandinistas' ignorance of the unique conditions on the Atlantic Coast was a shortcoming they "shared with virtually all western Nicaraguans, regardless of political orientation" (p. 259). This cultural ignorance even stymied humanitarian efforts by the FSLN. The government explained its removal of Miskito Indians from the Honduran border region (the site of intense battles between the Sandinista military and contra guerillas) to relocation settlements called Tasba Pri as a measure to take the Miskito out of harm's way, but in the process the government inadvertently violated Miskito cultural sensibilities. The Sandinista government, for instance, constructed homes for relocated families, unaware of the importance that the Miskito placed on a man building his own home for his wife and family. The Sandinistas learned from their mistakes and took steps to rectify the situation–including literacy programs in Creole English and Miskito and a policy of autonomy for the Atlantic Coast.

Whisnant elaborates on his theme of the political exploitation of culture through four detailed case studies. The first case study, entitled "Looting the Past," examines the collection of Nicaraguan antiquities during the nineteenth century. Whisnant views the activities of collectors associated with the British Museum, the Louvre, the Smithsonian Institution, and Harvard's Peabody Museum as symbolic of the dealings of imperial powers with less developed nations. Whisnant dubs the collections "warrants of imperial power" (p. 275). He notes that "the market-driven contribution of cultural artifacts from marginalized cultural and ethnic groups, poor colonies, and client states to centers of national wealth and power was a pervasive feature of virtually worldwide politics of culture in the nineteenth century" (pp. 307-8). While intriguing, the study leaves some questions unanswered. Under what arrangements did collectors make acquisitions? Whisnant noted, for example, that E. George Squier "procured" a statue for the Smithsonian, but the reader is left to wonder what Whisnant meant by "procured," especially because the word is placed in suspicious quotation marks. Was the statue stolen? Did an official government policy exist regarding antiquities? If so, why did it go unenforced? Were officials profiting (openly or under the table) from their dealings with collectors?

The second and third cases examine the ways in which both the Somozas and Sandinistas manipulated the memory and image of two of Nicaragua's greatest heroes–Ruben Dario and Augusto Cesar Sandino. Whisnant demonstrates that political leaders on the Right and Left appropriated these men "as legitimizing warrants for their own ideology and political programs" (p. 314). He finds the efforts to use Dario for nationalistic purposes ironic, given the fact that Dario spent most of his time outside of Nicaragua, admired elite European culture, and rarely made his native country the subject of his poetry. Yet both the Somozas and Sandinistas sought to put him to use, not surprising given the stature of the poet in Nicaraguan society (admiring Nicaraguans went so far as to preserve the brain and other organs of this intellectual hero). The ambiguity and contradictions in Dario's work facilitate manipulation of the poet's memory. Judicious editing and crafty interpretations can make the work of Dario sound Somocista or Sandinista. Whisnant does not try to define Dario's political views, but rather focuses on how the Somozas and Sandinistas manipulated him for their own purposes. Somoza's Ministry of Public Education edited its 1935 volume of Dario's poetry to change its meaning. In particular, the Ministry removed portions that might have offended the United States–Somoza's ally–and that criticized conditions within Nicaragua. The triumph of the Sandinista Revolution heralded the beginning of a concerted effort to create a Sandinista Dario. Ernesto Cardenal went so far as to proclaim that "This revolution was a dream of Dario" (p. 334). The Sandinistas, just like their Somocista predecessors, edited Dario's work to reflect the needs of their own political agenda. Not surprisingly, the FSLN emphasized anti-imperialist elements in the poet's works and twisted the author's words to make him appear to have been a Marxist sympathizer. Sandinista vice-president Sergio Ramirez even found it telling that Dario was born in the same year that Marx's *Das Kapital* first appeared!

Whisnant next turns his attention to the appropriation of the image, legend, and myth of Augusto Cedar Sandino. He observes that "[a]lthough both Sandino's epic feats themselves and the legends and myths subsequently woven about them have been explained almost exclusively in political and military terms, both were profoundly cultural in their bases and implications" (p. 345). As with Dario, Whisnant does not try to sort out the truth regarding Sandino, but rather the ways in which Somocistas and Sandinistas portrayed Sandino for their own political purposes. Again like Dario, Sandino's life presents "a very mixed array of ideas, values, and actions for interpretation" (p. 361). The battle over Sandino's place in Nicaraguan history began shortly after his death. Anastasio Somoza Garcia's 1936 book, *El Verdadero Sandino o el calvario de las Segovia* (*The true Sandino, or the Calvary of the Segovias*) was a work of

character assassination. Somoza emphasized Sandino's illegitimate birth, bad language, self-centered nature, heavy drinking, and ignorance. The dictator claimed that Sandino was demented and had violated graves and that his men were a "ferocious band" that looted and pillaged. The opposition presented Sandino in a different light. Positive portrayals of Sandino appeared among the vanguardistas and the general population in the form of songs and legends that emphasized Sandino's patriotism and the struggle against Yankee imperialism and brutality. Making Sandino a hero of nationalist resistance against imperialism, Fidel Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara resurrected his image in the 1950s, as did Carlos Fonseca, founder of the FSLN, in the 1960s. Fonseca's 1966 biography of Sandino is quite different from Somoza's earlier work. Fonseca emphasized the fact that Sandino was self-taught, had proletarian and indigenous origins, and had fought for national liberation against the United States Marines. Whisnant finds that Fonseca's account was "essentially grounded on fact....Nevertheless, Fonseca's own ideology appears to have predisposed him to misread some key elements of both Sandino's politics and the culture of the period" (p. 363). An example of this misreading was Fonseca's attempt to link Sandino with the international communist movement. Sergio Ramirez's "El muchacho de Niquinohomo" made similar distortions.

The final case study, "New Women and (Not So) New Men," illustrates that manipulation of culture for political ends is not always successful. This was certainly the case with the Sandinistas' efforts to reshape gender relationships in Nicaragua. Whisnant finds that, despite intense efforts to do so, the FSLN government failed to make any substantial transformation in gender relations (p. 393). The reason for the failure, according to Whisnant, is what he calls "cultural recalcitrance," defined in this case as "the durability of assumptions, values, behaviors, social and cultural norms, and images of men and women" (p. 385). This stems from daily practices, institutions, and "a broader hegemonic order...created in the service of men's interests" (p. 385).

Whisnant has packed *Rascally Signs* with an intriguing array of themes and issues. The scope of the book is so broad, however, that at times he has insufficient opportunity for comprehensive development of these themes. The reader is left with many unanswered questions and wishing for more by way of examples that would support the general concepts. Particularly in the early chapters, Whisnant's coverage lacks depth, especially from the perspective of one already familiar with the basics of Latin America's colonial era and Nicaragua's nineteenth-century history. It is best to think of these early chapters as overviews that provide a general foundation for the discussion of twentieth-century issues and events rather than thorough treatments of the link between culture and politics in the colonial era and the nineteenth century. The real strength of Whisnant's book is his coverage of the policies of the Somoza and Sandinista regimes. The case studies on Dario and Sandino are marvelous and provide not only insight on the Nicaraguan political scene, but serve as jumping off points for discussion on the ways in which societies and nation states around the world manipulate the images of their heroes–from George Washington to Jose Marti.

A cautionary note is necessary regarding the intriguing, though perhaps misleading, title of the book. Whisnant's title draws from words Mark Twain penned as he crossed the isthmus in Nicaragua on his way to California in December 1866: "War and plantation bitters men, and all such people, who invade all sacred places with their rascally signs, and mar every landscape one might gaze upon in worship." The reference to "sacred places" might lead the leader to anticipate a discussion of the church's role in Nicaragua's cultural battles, but these readers are likely to be disappointed. Whisnant mentions the Catholic Church and Moravian missionaries in various contexts, but a full exploration of religious institutions and their position regarding cultural policies is not forthcoming. This is surprising given the central place of religious institutions in Nicaraguan political and cultural life. The hostility between the church hierarchy and the Sandinista government, the division within the church itself between Liberation Theologians and church leaders, and the more recent gains of Protestant evangelical sects based in the United States would have made the discussion of culture wars more complete.

Whisnant does a commendable job in tackling the extensive secondary material on Nicaragua that has proliferated since the country's revolution caught the eyes of numerous scholars. In the first two chapters, he relies almost exclusively on these secondary materials, but later chapters draw from both secondary and primary sources. Whisnant supplemented his research with primary materials from a variety of library and museum collections as well as Nicaraguan newspapers. What is surprisingly in relatively short supply are actual examples of the poetry, art work, lyrics, and other forms of cultural expression that governments and resistance groups used to advance their causes. The book does include illustrations of murals, drawings, and advertisements as well as some snippets from plays, songs, and poems, but there are not as many of these examples as one might expect from a book

of this nature.

Whisnant has made a valuable contribution to the historical literature on Nicaragua. *Rascally Signs* is also a worthwhile and fascinating read for anyone who is interested in the more general relationship between culture and politics. It is accessible to beginners, but offers valuable insight for scholars and raises issues that will intrigue even the veteran Latin Americanist. As such, it is a strong candidate for undergraduate and graduate courses alike and should promote discussion and further research among scholars–not only on Nicaragua's long history of culture wars, but on similar conflicts in Latin America and beyond.

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