

Review - Perspectives on the Grenada Revolution

Written by Gary Williams

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GARY WILLIAMS, SEP 20 2017

Perspectives on the Grenada Revolution
Edited by Nicole Phillip-Dowe and John Angus Martin
Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016

It is now nearly 40 years since the New Jewel Movement seized power in Grenada and promised Grenadians 'all democratic freedoms' and 'a bright future'; the Revolution instead took an authoritarian path. Whilst it lasted less than five years the revolutionary period was a defining one that impacted far beyond Grenada's shores. It was the first non-peaceful transfer of power in the Anglophone Caribbean, the first revolution and rejection of the Westminster model of rule in the region, and ultimately resulted in the first United States invasion in the Eastern Caribbean.

The origin of this book is a University of the West Indies Open Campus Grenada Country conference held in March 2016 which focused on the events and aftermath of the revolutionary process. Whilst there is an extensive literature on all aspects of the Grenada Revolution and aftermath, Phillip-Dowe and Martin point to the fact that the majority of this literature has been authored by non-Grenadians. With this in mind, the aim of this book is to capture the Revolution from a Grenadian perspective; they have assembled a cast of contributors who, apart from one, are all Grenadians who were either participants, children, teenagers, young adults, or even unborn during the 1979-83 period.

The book consists of an Introduction, 12 chapters, a selected bibliography, list of contributors and index. In the opening chapter Martin compares the Grenada Revolution with Fedon's Rebellion against British colonial rule (1795-96) highlighting the importance of foreign assistance and the central role of internal divisions in the rebellion's downfall. The People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) frequently invoked the spirit and memory of Fedon without, one suspects, understanding this aspect and thus history repeated itself in general terms. Joseph examines from a legal perspective whether the events of 13 March 1979 were a revolution or a coup d'état. This distinction had particular bearing in the Maurice Bishop murder trial where the Court ruled the latter, citing the PRG's failure to produce a new constitution or hold elections. Joseph agrees that technically it was a coup d'état but also 'an emotional revolution'. Although Joseph does not draw on the wider literature on revolutions in general, it is noteworthy that most of that literature omits Grenada completely due to its failure to institutionalise and consolidate—the hallmarks of a revolution (Selbin 1998).[1]

Layne argues that the demise of the Revolution was due to 'overstretch to bursting point' and 'missteps in strategic formation and implementation', dismissing the familiar explanation of a power struggle fuelled by ideological differences and personal ambition on behalf of a faction led by Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard. It should be noted that Layne was a member of the PRG Central Committee and day-to-day head of the People's Revolutionary Army; he served 26 years in prison for his part in the murder of Maurice Bishop and his colleagues. Layne also speculates on how it may have been possible to avoid or minimize US pressure on the Revolution. On both fronts it was the PRG's Marxist-Leninist ideological straitjacket that prevented them from abandoning the vanguard party model or compromising their principles to improve relations with the US and give the Revolution some much needed breathing space.

Phillip-Dowe shows the surprising continuity in the types of roles women held under Gairy and the PRG. The

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establishment of organisations such as the National Women's Organisation increased dramatically the number of women involved, but senior political roles remained 'kitchen cabinet' positions rather than in key ministries. Douglas demonstrates that the PRG viewed religious groups as the most dangerous counterrevolutionary sector, due to their criticism of the PRG and broad links to the populace, and drew upon Cuban advice to help undermine the Church's influence. This was an example of the PRG's intolerance of any real or imagined opposition to the Revolution. Renowned Grenadian writer Merle Collins' chapter traces the impact of the Revolution on her poetry. As with much of her work it is about memory and journey as she revisits her poems from the revolutionary era. It is an evocative journey from excitement, enthusiasm, optimism and pride towards questioning, quiet reflection and eventual disappointment and disaffection.

Smith-Brooks-Lowe examines the patterns and contradictions that mark the ways in which the revolutionary years are remembered and forgotten, finding that the Revolution is mainly characterized by Grenadians in terms of conflict and upheaval and Bishop only referred to in terms of his death. Benjamin and Douglas find the Revolution largely absent from the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate in Caribbean History curriculum and question whether Grenadians want the Revolution on the curriculum, preferring perhaps to forget and move on. The message from several chapters in this collection suggest that including the Revolution on the curriculum would be a move in the right direction but that how it should be taught will open up a whole new debate. After all, memories are not just for those who lived through the revolutionary era but also for those whose memories will be shaped by others. In the final chapter, Puri considers that the dominant mode of memory of the Revolution has been too focused on tragedy, organised around leaders and tragic heroes, and overlooks the joyfulness and creativity the period involved and the legacy of the Revolution. She concludes with a challenging question: 'what would a public memorial to the Revolution look like that was not organised around loss and mourning?' (p. 178).

The range of authors is one of the strengths of this book. The contributors are a mixture of academics, artists, legal professionals, teachers and third sector authors. The chapters do vary somewhat in style and quality as would be expected but use a variety of sources and all add something useful to the story of the Revolution. Martin's comparative study chapter and Claude Douglas' chapter are particularly insightful. First-hand accounts of historical events can be important source material; Layne's reflections, based on his forthcoming book, come direct from his Central Committee experience and should be read critically. The four chapters examining memory reflect the increasing focus on this aspect and complement one another. The book is well illustrated and the chapter on art and the Revolution boasts a generous 24 illustrations alone, although the arrangement does leave some large spaces on several pages.

Books based on conference proceedings can often be problematic in terms of structure and content. This book would have been improved by grouping the chapters into distinct parts. Indeed, the conference that the book draws from had a number of sub-themes: historical and theoretical perspective; the Caribbean perspective; politics and power; memory and reconciliation; women and religion; and cultural expression. Given the point made about most of the literature being authored by non-Grenadians it might have been interesting to provide some commentary on this.

The Grenada Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which reported in 2006, provided little in the way of truths or reconciliation and underlined the reality of how Grenadians have remembered and/or deliberately suppressed memory of the revolutionary era. Since then, a number of publications^[2] have examined the important topic of memory and the Revolution and this edited collection makes a useful contribution to furthering our understanding of the complexities involved and enduring legacy of the Revolution.

Notes

[1] Eric Selbin, *Modern Latin American Revolutions* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

[2] Jermaine O. McCalpin, 'Written into Amnesia? The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Grenada', *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 3/4 (September/December) 2013, 113-140; Shalini Puri, *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); *Small Axe: A Caribbean*

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Gary Williams is a Research Development Manager in the Research and Enterprise Office at the University of Essex. He has published several articles on Grenada and is the author of *US-Grenada Relations: Revolution and Intervention in the Backyard* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).